

GONG YOGA

Healing and Enlightenment
Through Sound

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PREFACE

Houston, Texas 1973

It is the end of my first yoga class. I am lying on the floor of a former hippie communal house freshly transformed into a Kundalini Yoga ashram. My yoga teacher looks just like the friends I drop acid with—bearded, longhaired, sparkly-eyed—except he is dressed all in white, wearing a turban and waving a gong mallet over his head.

“Just relax,” he says as he sits next to the gong, “and let the sound of the gong take you where you need to go.” I closed my eyes. And then God started shouting in my ears with the first strike of the mallet against the gong. A choir of orgasmic angels was riding a fire engine to enlightenment, singing a soulful wail of ecstasy as wave after wave of sound pulled me out of my body and plastered me to the ceiling, altering my consciousness faster than you can say “lysergic acid diethylamide.” I had just been gonged.

All that breathing, all that movement and yoga postures, was all a preparation for that experience of union through sound, the Yoga of the Gong. My lifelong journey with yoga had now begun and my traveling companion would always be the God of Sound, disguised as a bronze metal disc.

The Gong remained a mystery to me as I plunged into the teachings and practices of yoga. I went through several teacher-training programs over the years in various disciplines and traditions, always returning to my lifelong love of Kundalini Yoga and the sound of the gong that accompanied so many classes.

I taught yoga to thousands of students and eventually began training hundreds of yoga teachers as we opened several yoga centers in Austin, Texas. There were so many resources to draw upon, sacred texts, trainings with expert yogis, and the presence of the master teacher in my life, Yogi Bhajan. I shared all these teachings with my yoga students and teachers to the best of my abilities.

Yet I always felt the lack of good foundational information and training about the gong itself. I originally purchased a gong soon after my wife and I began teaching yoga in our home, and proceeded to play it loudly and often badly as I practiced on myself and students.

To the credit of the gong itself, even a poorly played gong held a sway and a promise of what could be to students who asked for more and more of its sound. Yoga and the Gong are great teachers, and slowly I improved on my own as I figured things out.

Then one day good fortune brought me into the presence of a long-time student of Yogi Bhajan and expert Kundalini Yoga teacher, Gurucharan Singh Khalsa. He demonstrated a few playing techniques and then handed me the notes on playing the gong that were taken from a video lecture and gong demonstration by Yogi Bhajan.

I worked with those notes for a number of years and read everything I could about the gong itself. I found very little other information about a structured way that one could learn to play the gong or how to incorporate its sound into a yoga class. At the same time, my wife and I began using the gong for therapeutic work with yoga students, using it in conjunction with the techniques of Yoga Nidra, a transformational deep relaxation and guided meditation technique. I also trained the teachers in our yoga centers to play the gong as students began demanding more gong in their classes. Finally, yoga teachers from outside the Kundalini Yoga tradition, as well as therapists and counselors in other fields, wanted to learn more about this yoga and gong stuff.

From my experiences and their requests, this book was born. Like many fledgling books in a new field, I suspect it will prove initially most helpful as a pioneering effort yet hopefully be surpassed by other contributions as Gong Yoga becomes more widely known and practiced.

May you give and receive good gong.
Sat Nam.

THE STORY OF THE GONG

The gong has been involved in every kind of human activity, from the earthly to the ethereal. In Buddhist monasteries, gongs call the attention of the gods. In ancient Greece, they open the realm of the dead. In Borneo, they are beaten to frighten away storms. In Ceram, gongs are given as wedding gifts. In Assam, they are used as funeral pyres. During war, gongs intimidate enemies and gather troops. In peace, they celebrate festivals and accompany dances.

Gongs are considered magical by many civilizations. They are used to heal the sick, banish evil spirits, and summon the elements. Even the touch of gong was said to rid the body of disease and give happiness and strength. Gongs were a sign of prosperity and used as currency. Princes and chiefs demonstrated their wealth and announced their rank by the gong they owned. Oaths were enforced by drinking from a gong. Southeast Asians believe each gong has a soul, and they give them names of respect, such as “Venerable Tiger” or “Sir Earthquake.”

The gong has played an important role in ceremonies, rituals, and inner journeys among all the world’s peoples. Deaths, births, marriages, and initiations were all accompanied by the sounding of the gong. More than simply a musical instrument, the gong is an agent of transformation. When the gong is played, the body, mind, and spirit change.

For thousands of years, across all civilizations, all who hear it instinctively recognize the power of the gong. So powerful is its sound, the gong became an object of worship to some people, a portal to God for others, and for everyone a presence that demands undivided attention.

Where does its power come from? How is it different from other musical instruments? The answers lie within the sound of the gong itself.

The Sound of the Gong

When we hear the gong for the first time, it challenges us to experience sound in a surprising and almost totally unique way. It is unlike any other musical instrument, both in how it behaves and how it interacts with the listener.

All musical instruments produce a sound envelope when played. The sound envelope consists of the initial sound made by the instrument when it is set into play, such as plucking a guitar string or striking a piano key, and then the accompanying decline of its sound over time. Most musical sounds have a predictable decline of sound (called the “decay”) after the initial play or moment of impact (called the “attack.”) The attack and decay cycle of an instrument’s sound envelope determine how the listener experiences the sound.

For example, the sound envelope of wooden blocks, one of the earliest primitive musical instruments, begins with a sharp attack as the blocks are clapped together and declines quickly as the sound dissipates almost immediately producing a characteristic brittle sound. The sound envelope of wind instruments begins with a soft attack as the breath is blown into the instrument and ends with a gradual decay as the breath of the performer fades away. Both types of instruments produce a sound decay that is linear and predictable to the ear.

The sound envelope of a gong, however, is unpredictable, non-linear and indeed trans-spatial. After the strike by the head of the mallet, the gong’s sound swells to an initial peak and begins to decay smoothly. After the first decay, however, the gong’s sound returns of its own accord without any additional attack and builds to a second and even higher sound peak before finally fading away. The gong’s sound envelope is like the delayed action of a wave that falls and then returns to an even higher level. This wave-like movement of peaks and valleys in the gong’s sound carries the listener farther and farther on a journey, much like the swelling tides of the ocean, always returning and building again and again.

This returning sound of the gong was once described by Yogi Bhanjan, the master of Kundalini Yoga and the Gong, as “resound.” He explained that the “gong is not the sound, gong is the resound. Before resound you have no power. You go in the mountain, you say one word, that echo will go thousands times more, thousands of miles. That is the power of the resounding sound or anahad (note: sound without limit or boundaries). Unlimited sound vibrates and creates light and creates life.”

Because of its returning sound or “resounding,” the gong produces a complex synthesis of blended overtones that allow the listener to learn to listen in a completely new way. As the returning waves build on each other to produce

new and intricate tones, the sound of the gong becomes so complex, so unpredictably translinear, the human mind is unable to categorize it.

As a result of the mind's inability to identify and predict the sound, people often hear a multitude of other instruments within the sound of the gong as the mind creatively attempts to compare and contrast what this sound could be. With eyes closed, some people are convinced that other music or instruments or electric amplification must be used to create the complexity and texture of the sound made by a single gong. Even with eyes open, people hear bells, drums, harps, horns or even voices singing as the gong is played.

This entirely personal perception of the gong's sound is due to its undertones. These undertones, which are produced when loud tones are sounded together, are known as combination tones. Acousticians consider combination tones to be a physiological phenomenon, rather than an acoustical one, because the tones are actually synthesized within the inner ear of each listener by the vibration of the cochlea, or extremely delicate hairs. The gong thus produces an inner sound as well as an outer sound. It is this dual sound that takes each listener deeper into their own experience of being so that the sound of the gong becomes individually unique to each person.

Dane Rudhyar in his book *The Magic of Tone and the Art of Music* refers to this inner sound of the gong as a "holistic" resonance in which the non-harmonic and non-periodic tones lead the listener into the non-ordinary realm of the spirit. "Perhaps more deeply than anything else," Rudhyar writes, "gongs are the concrete, physical manifestations of the sounds of the souls of the great universal religions."

The only comparable musical sound to the gong is made by large church bells whose peals produce similar complex combination tones that also take the listener out of ordinary reality. It is interesting that both the church bell in the West and the gong in the East have both been associated with the ability to call and remind its listeners of an otherworldly plane of experience.

Because the sound of the gong is so uniquely individual in the combination tones produced at the moment of playing, it is difficult to capture its sound with a recording. Many people describe a recorded gong sound as somewhat flattened, and its most powerful effects are experienced when the gong is played live within the immediate presence of the listeners.

The Nature of the Gong

The gong belongs to the musical family of instruments known as idiophones, or “self-sounders.” Idiophones make a sound when scrapped, rubbed, or hit without the intervention of other materials. The sounding substance (the body of the gong in this case) is its own source of vibration, receiving acoustic energy and transmitting it in the same action. The other musical instrument families, such as aerophones (horns and woodwinds), membranophones (drums), and chordophones (stringed instruments), are “coupled sound-producers” and require the resonant support of a structure (such as the body of a guitar or air column of a flute) for the vibrations to produce the music. The gong, as well as wooden temple blocks and bells, are ancient idiophones. Modern idiophones include the xylophone, cymbals, and castanets.

Gongs are usually circular (although a polygonal form is encountered in Borneo and a triangular form exists in India), often have turned rims, and are made of metal. Traditionally, gongs are made of bronze, although other metals and alloys occur, such as bell-metal in India, beaten iron in Africa, gold in China, and silver in Tibet (the addition of silver produces a farther reaching sound). Typically, gongs are composed of 70% to 80% copper and 30% to 20% tin with the addition of lead, nickel, iron, or zinc. Instruments of lesser quality generally have a higher proportion of tin (or lead) to copper.

The surface of a gong is either flat or has a central raised dome, or “boss,” in the middle. Flat gongs have an indefinite pitch and are known in East Asia as male gongs. The oldest known form of gong appears to have been flat. Bossed gongs (with a raised center) have a definite pitch and are known as female gongs. Bossed gongs, and those with a deep rim, are invariably struck in the center from where the tone issues. Flat gongs are struck off-center. The tone of the bossed gong does not differ from that of the flat gong but is definite in pitch. The gongs of China are both bossed and flat; those of the Southeast Asia islands and Africa are bossed, and those of India are flat. Gongs produced for Western music are both bossed and flat.

Gongs are also differentiated into two other categories: those that are suspended vertically and those that are horizontally placed. Single gongs are usually suspended vertically. Horizontal gongs are often placed together in groups on two crossed or parallel strings within a wooden frame and are in greatest use in Southeast Asia.

Gongs come in a wide variety of sizes, from those under six inches in diameter and carried by hand to those nearly nine feet in height. The average size of most gongs used in Western music range from 24 to 40 inches in diameter. Gongs are usually sounded with a beater or mallet, although in Java the player’s fist is also used.

How Gongs Are Made

The art of gong making has always been hidden in myths and mystery. The original gong makers often fasted, prayed, and performed other austerities before beginning their craft to enlist the higher powers. Javanese gong smiths assumed a secret identity and assumed to protect themselves from malicious entities. On the day the gong was made, the gong smith meditated and chanted mantras as the art of gong making was considered to be a sacred practice.

Traditionally, the four principal centers for manufacturing gongs were China, Burma, Annam, and Java. Gong making later spread to the West in the late 19th century with the Italians, and then to Germany and Switzerland.

The traditional gong manufacturing process consisted of heating, pouring, hammering, smoothing, tuning, and polishing. The base metal copper is first melted and then the other metals added and stirred together. When ready, the molten metal is poured into a wax or clay molds or cakes of metal that are then shaped by constant hammering as the metals cool. With a large gong, the heating and hammering process might occur over a hundred times. When fully shaped, the gong is plunged into cold water to keep the metal elastic as it is tuned. After the gong is completely cooled, the gong smith begins an extensive tuning process by hammering the striking positions of the gong on both the inside and the outside. The sound is tested and then re-hammered to refine. For high quality gongs, three separate tuning processes may be necessary to produce the desired sound. Often the tone improves with age over 20 to 30 years. Finally the tuned gong is polished and ornamented.

In the West, gong making in the 21st century (such as done by the European firm of Paiste) differs from the traditional Asiatic method of pouring molten metal into molds. In this case, the gongs are cut from tempered rolled sheet metal into circular discs that are then heated and shaped by individual hammer strokes. After the gong goes through reheating and hammering, the instrument rests for three to four months before it is tuned and polished. Each gong becomes an individual work of created art with its own distinctive personality and some say sound.

A finished gong is noted primarily by its circumference size in inches or centimeters and by the frequency or tuning of sound. It is also distinguished by the number of distinctive sound waves it makes when struck. High-quality gongs usually produce twelve or more of these distinctive returning sound waves when individually struck.

Origin of the Gong

The gong is an ancient instrument of unknown origin. The gong is first mentioned at the beginning of the sixth century in China where it first appeared in Hsi Yu, a region located between Tibet and Burma. The gong, however, was not originally a Chinese instrument. The Chinese ascribed the gong's origin to another culture farther west, which some historians believe to be in northwest India, or the area now known as Afghanistan, where it was probably used in Buddhist rituals.

Some ethnomusicologists speculate the gong may have come from Greece and then spread to northwest India with the expedition of Alexander the Great. There is reference to gong-like instruments in Grecian culture as early as the eighth-century B.C. Plutarch writes about the bronze "drums" the Parthian troops used to intimidate their enemies. The Greek instrument called the echeion, used in plays to produce thunder of the gods and to signal the climax of a rituals, may actually have been an early form of the gong. The Greeks also used the echeion in death rituals in Eleusis and Sparta, much like other cultures have used the gong in funeral rites. Most likely, however, the origin of the gong predates even Aegean civilization.

The gong may have appeared as early as the Bronze Age (circa 3000 BC to 2000 BC) when tools and weapons were first made from bronze. The first gong may have been a bronze shield that was struck in war to signal an attack or retreat. Another possibility is that the first gong evolved from a bronze disk made to represent the sun that was worshiped by early farming cultures. In any case, it is probably safe to assume that the gong has several origin points in history and locales since there are many different types found all over the world.

In the West, Romans used gongs and metal disks (discus) as signal instruments. A rimmed gong from the first or second century A.D. Roman Empire was discovered in Wiltshire, England. In the bible Paul mentions the "sounding gong or tinkling cymbal" (I Corinthians xiii. 1) and in fifteenth century Europe, medieval drawings depict a tormentor mocking Christ with a gong.

The word "gong" was first used in sixteenth century Europe. The word comes from the Indonesian name for the native gong instrument called "bonang," or "bonang-bonang" for the plural. Dutch colonists in Indonesia translated "bonang-bonang" as "gom-gom" which became phonetically rendered as "gong-gong" and later shortened to "gong." Interestingly enough, the Indonesian word sometimes used to describe the gong is "cakram," derived from the Sanskrit work for "chakra," or wheel which is also the designation used by yogis for the esoteric energy centers of the subtle body.

Although European writers described the gong in the 1600s, it did not become a part of Western music until around the French Revolution. The gong, however, has played an important part in world music for at least a thousand years. All Asian cultures use the gong, and each country's gong has its unique characteristics. For example, Indian gongs are usually small with a flat surface and give a high pitch. Burmese gongs are much thicker than their Chinese counterparts. In Java, sets of tuned gongs are played together. Elsewhere around the world, gongs are made for a variety of musical and ceremonial uses. In Africa, large suspended gongs made of iron are used in the Ethiopian Coptic church. In South America, gongs discovered in Peruvian tombs are slightly concave-convex and make a clear resonant sound when struck.