

Introduction

The practice of listening to subtle, inner sounds during meditation to concentrate and elevate the mind has a long history in various religions around the world, including Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, and other spiritual movements (K. Singh 1973; Khan 1996; Beck 2009).

Even Western-based religious traditions, particularly certain gnostic schools, have mentioned listening to a divine melody that lifts the soul to higher regions. The Nag Hammadi library discovered in 1945 in Upper Egypt, for example, contains the only existing copy of an early manuscript that gives high praise to a spiritual sound. The book *The Gnostic Mystery: A Connection between Ancient and Modern Mysticism* (Diem 1992) features a number of passages that highlight the importance of this sacred melody.

In the Trimorphic Protennoia it is described in the following way: I am [the Word] who dwells [in the] ineffable [Silence]. I dwell in undefiled [Light] and a Thought [revealed itself] perceptibly through [the great] Sound . . . And it [the Sound] exists from the beginning in the foundations of the All.

(Diem 1992: 45)

Later Christian mystics reported hearing a divine melody when enraptured in prayer, as Richard Rolle of the fourteenth century confessed in his mystical treatise *Fire of Love*.

But when half a year, three months and some weeks had passed by – during which that warmth of surpassing sweetness continued with me – there was borne in on my perception a heavenly spiritual sound, which pertains to the song of everlasting praise and the sweetness of the invisible melody. Invisible I call it because it can be neither known nor heard except by him to whom it is vouchsafed; and he must first be purified and separated from the world. For while I was sitting in the same chapel, and chanting psalms at night before supper, as I could, I heard as it were the tinkling music of stringed instruments, or rather of singers, over my head. (Rolle 1996: 38)

Other Christian mystics have also alluded to a divine sound or melody. Jakob Böhme (1575–1624), in his text *Aurora* (Böhme 1914), speaks of hearing a plethora of musical instruments as if they were played by a divine orchestra and reached out toward eternity.

D. Scott Rogo (1950–1990), who wrote two books on “paranormal music experiences,” makes the argument that hearing mystical sounds is a transcultural phenomenon and not merely relegated to those of a religious bent. To back up this assertion, Rogo provides five categories in which individuals report hearing inner melodies, four of which have a bearing here:

1. Persons who hear sounds in a “normal state”
2. Those undergoing a near-death experience (NDE) who hear music and, on occasion, those who attend to them
3. People who have out-of-body experiences (OBEs) or who practice “astral travel”
4. Mystics who report hearing an inner music (Rogo 1970, 1972)

In India the sound current practice has a long history and appears to date back to before the Vedic period.

Mircea Eliade, in *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom* (1970: 390–91), provides suggestive notes on “mystical sounds” and quotes Brhadaranyaka Upanishad and several other Buddhist and Hindu scriptures of antiquity that describe the internal hearing of a bell sound. He also refers to the *Dabestan-e Mazaheb* wherein the author “speaks of meditation on absolute sound.”

Although each religion gives a different description of the practice and each has varying interpretations of what listening to the inner sound ultimately means, in Indian religious systems two terms have become predominant: *nad/nada yoga* and *shabd yoga*. Both terms are more or less interchangeable, though *nad/nada yoga* as a descriptive marker appears more frequently before the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. For example, almost all Radhasoami-related movements use the word *shabd* (Juergensmeyer 1991) and seldom use the word *nad*. As for the etymology of the terms, *shabd* is a Sanskrit term meaning “sound-speech,” often used in different contexts to mean eternal and undivided. *Nad* is also a Sanskrit word meaning sound, usually in terms of something sacred or transcendent.

Early figurines discovered in Mohenjo-daro and Harappa in the Indus Valley, which date back to before the Vedas, indicate that some form of yoga was practiced. Yan Y. Dhyansky has given an elaborate argument in his article “The Indus Valley Origin of a Yoga Practice” (1987) that the practice of withdrawing one’s consciousness from the body has a long precedence and can be dated to before the Vedas were finalized. “The system of Yoga which originated in the Indus Valley has existed for more than five thousand years and is now moving from being an Indian tradition to becoming the common property of all humanity” (89–108).

In the book *Listening to the Inner Sound Current: The Perennial Practice of Shabd Yoga* (Lane 2018) Diem-Lane and Lane pointed to the ubiquity of sound current practices found throughout the world, arguing that it is reasonable to assume that the interior exploration of one’s own consciousness by hearing subtle sounds and contemplating inner light is not merely a cultural artifact restricted to certain geographical regions, but is rather a biological inherency,

part of what is neurologically possible among *Homo sapiens*, which can be potentially accessed by anyone, anywhere and anytime. In short, shabd or nad yoga elicits a structural pathway within one's own neuroanatomies. Yet it is nevertheless evident that the evolution of this practice has cultural and historical variants. Indian spiritual systems, in particular, have defined and refined the technique and have given the most exhaustive treatment of the subject in the world.

Since listening to the inner sound to elevate one's consciousness is a neural possibility within human beings and it most likely has a naturalistic origination, the question we wish to explore in the following sections is how the practice manifested over time in differing geographical regions. What we discovered in researching this from a historical and sociological perspective is that the modus operandi of concentrating on inner sounds seems intertwined with the theology of the local region. In other words, Christianity's understanding of shabd yoga – a term we use loosely to mean simply any form of meditation that listens to the inner sound for concentration – is invariably explained in light of the Bible, whereas Sikhism's understanding is explained in light of the Sri Guru Granth Sahib. The universal aspect of sound meditation, in other words, is relativized by the historical time and context in which it is practiced.

Today there are a number of new religious movements that have made listening to the inner sound current a cornerstone of their teachings. These groups include the Radhasoamis (and their various branches), the Divine Light Mission, Eckankar, the Movement of Spiritual Inner Awareness (MSIA), MasterPath, the Sawan-Kirpal Mission, Quan Yin/Ching Hai, the Self-Realization Fellowship, Manavta Mandir, the Healthy, Happy, and Holy Organization (3HO), ISHA, and even Theosophy, among others. In this study we provide a historical and comprehensive overview of these movements and how they have incorporated listening to the inner sound as part of their spiritual discipline. We are particularly interested in the distinctive and nuanced ways that each group teaches how to listen to the inner sound current and how they interpret it in their own unique theologies.

However, before we commence detailing the popularity of shabd yoga across a number of new religious movements, it is important to properly understand the historical roots of the practice, particularly as it was developed in India and Persia. Genealogically speaking, almost every new religious movement across the globe that emphasizes listening to the sound current as part of its meditative discipline has roots in the Sufi, Sant, and Radhasoami traditions of North India. Why this is so is of special interest since it underlines how religious ideas can spread like memes (Dawkins 1976; Blackmore 2000) across cultural barriers and in the process adapt to new geographical locations and audiences.

For example, Eckankar's founder, Paul Twitchell, who started his group in San Diego, California, was a former initiate of Kirpal Singh, whose center of operation, Ruhani Satsang, was in Delhi, India (Lane 1983). Although there are definite similarities between these two groups, Twitchell modified shabd yoga teachings so as to appeal to a more Westernized clientele (Lane 2020a).

It is important to document how a core idea such as listening to the inner sound becomes theologically refashioned when it is subsumed by a new religious movement that wishes to genealogically *dissociate* itself from its predecessors. The reasons for this can be manifold, but it is primarily because the emphasis is on becoming established as a separate entity. The newly emerging religion and its founder disconnect instead of integrate the past from which they arose. This is mostly because there is a tension or fear that if such a past connection is made, the group will attract fewer followers (Lane 1983; K. P. Johnson 1998). Although the essential principle of shabd yoga – hearing inner, subtle sounds to concentrate the mind – may not dramatically change, how one views its purpose and efficacy is open to a variety of fluctuations related to time and place.

In the following section details about the relevant neurobiological basis underlying such a discipline is also explored since it clearly indicates the transcultural nature of the practice. We then focus on how the confluence of Sufism, Sant Mat, yoga, Tantrism, and later Sikhism led to a modern-day articulation of shabd yoga and the efficacy of listening to the inner sound current as an elemental spiritual technique. The goal here is to present a clear and comprehensive historical guidebook to groups that share a genealogical connection/association and a specific yogic technique. In the conclusion we want to explore how shabd yoga-related ideas may take on still newer forms and ways of expression in the future, especially in light of how technologies such as virtual and augmented reality are being employed.

The Neurobiological Basis of Shabd Yoga

The human brain is the most sophisticated operating system known to exist. It has roughly 86 billion neurons and trillions of synaptic connections via a vast labyrinth of axons, dendrites, and other subtle clefts. Although it weighs only three or so pounds, within its enfolded compound resides the most remarkable feature in the known universe – consciousness (Churchland 1986; Doran 2019).

Consciousness is the supreme mystery that enlivens all that we know about the world around us. While most of the time our awareness is projected outwardly in order to help us better survive and adapt in this evolutionary

experiment writ large, there are those mystical pioneers who have turned inward to discover where this very consciousness arises from and explore what possibilities it portends (S. Harris 2014). Humans have developed a variety of tools to alter their awareness and make it possible to venture into hitherto uncharted territories of the mind, including the practice of concentrating on subtle musical-like tones. It is intriguing to speculate about how listening to inner sounds originated among early humankind, long before it became codified as a practice. Several hypotheses offer tantalizing suggestions, including early NDEs, sleep paralysis, extended periods of sensory deprivation, chemical alteration, and more. In NDEs, for instance, a significant number of patients reported hearing a beautiful melody (Sriramamurti, Prashant & Mohan 2013).

I heard what seemed like millions of little golden bells ringing, tinkling; they rang and rang. Many times since, I've heard those bells in the middle of the night. Next I heard humming.

Music surrounded me. It came from all directions. Its harmonic beauty unlike earthly vocal or instrumental sounds was totally undistorted.

(Spencer 2011: 38)

Sleep paralysis is often accompanied by a severe feeling of immobility, a numbness where one feels as if frozen. According to a 2011 meta-analysis, “Lifetime Prevalence Rates of Sleep Paralysis: A Systematic Review,” “In conclusion, we have reviewed the available literature on lifetime episodes of SP and have found it to be a fairly common experience. Although occurring in less than 8.0% of the general population, it is much more frequent in students and psychiatric patients, and the difference between these latter two groups is surprisingly small” (Sharpless & Barber 2011: 313).

While at first glance one may wonder what sleep paralysis has to do with meditation or yoga, a close analysis shows that it may well have been a triggering point among early humans for a deeper psychic exploration. This is precisely because sleep paralysis is often accompanied by extremely vivid visions that are usually taken as real and not as mere dreamy hallucinations. In some sense, every night we sleep we will undergo varying degrees of “sleep paralysis” since it serves as a biochemical way to inhibit our bodily movements while dreaming. As Patricia Brooks and John Peever explain in their study of sleep paralysis,

Understanding the mechanisms mediating REM sleep paralysis is clinically important because they could explain the nature of REM sleep disorders such as RBD, sleep paralysis and cataplexy/narcolepsy. RBD results from loss of typical REM atonia, which allows pathological motor activation and dream enactment, which often lead to serious injuries. Conversely, sleep paralysis

and cataplexy result when REM atonia intrudes into wakefulness thus preventing normal behavior and movement. Determining the mechanistic nature of REM sleep paralysis will improve our understanding and treatment of such disorders. (Brooks & Peever, 2012: 9785–95)

There is an intriguing parallel here to shabd yoga meditation since one of the very first signs that the technique is working is a growing numbness and blissful sensation in the lower extremities of the body. This feeling of immobility eventually takes over the body and the meditator begins to have vivid inner experiences. Jagat Singh (1884–1951), the third guru proper in the Beas lineage, has argued that the feeling of paralysis in the body during shabd yoga meditation is an indication of inner progress. As he explained in a series of letters to his disciples:

The numbness of the lower limbs and a feeling of lightness throughout the body are signs of concentration.

The numbness of the body is the natural result of concentration and drawing up of consciousness, and you should count yourself fortunate in achieving such satisfactory progress within a very short time. The upward pull also is a mark of quick concentration and when it is complete you will see the light within and the Sound also will become clearer and finer.

The gradually increasing numbness of the body is the acid test and a proof of the withdrawal of the consciousness, and so far it was very satisfactory.

(S. B. J. Singh 1959: 169, 181)

Shabd yogis in general, however, have not tried to correlate their inner journeys with a deeper neurobiological understanding since their practice has been intertwined for centuries with a gnostic-like theology where the body and the spirit are viewed as distinct entities (Robinson 1979; Diem-Lane 2015).

However, if shabd yoga meditation is indeed a neurobiological process, then there should be telltale signs of such that can be quantified by accurately measuring the levels of neurotransmitters such as gamma-aminobutyric acid and glycine in the brain while one is feeling the sensation of conscious paralysis while meditating. Indeed, one wonders if there are not chemical ways of inducing the same effect in non-meditators and seeing whether they report similar experiences as their shabd yoga counterparts.

One hypothesis is that shabd yoga practitioners who experience the onslaught of numbness in their extremities – which shouldn't be confused with parasthesia, the sensation that one feels when one's foot goes to "sleep" – during deep meditation are experiencing a biochemical process that is similar to what happens when we are asleep and certain neurochemicals manifest to inhibit bodily movements. In other words, shabd yoga induces a conscious sleep paralysis of sorts.

If this is correct, we should be able to ascertain whether gamma-aminobutyric acid and glycine levels are operative (Diem-Lane & Lane 2018).

The brain is a simulator par excellence and when it is deprived of incoming stimuli, it tends to generate a panoply of fantastic narratives, whether in sleep when we dream or whenever certain psychoactive chemicals (organic or artificial) are ingested. Under these conditions the senses become aware of hitherto unknown or unexplored properties. The history of mysticism – East and West – is chock-full of superluminal reports where one experiences inner light, sensations of leaving the body, and hearing enchanting music. These remarkable accounts are generally viewed as indicative of higher spiritual attainment and thus looked upon with favor if they reinforce or legitimize the current thinking of the community (Lane 2019a).

However, today, given our more hyperscientific age, NDEs, OBEs, and religious visions are generally regarded as purely neurological in origin and thus not viewed as paranormal. This is particularly the case with hearing inner sounds that are often explained away as tinnitus, which the Mayo Clinic defines as “The perception of noise or ringing in the ears. A common problem, tinnitus affects about 15 to 20 percent of people. Tinnitus isn’t a condition itself – it’s a symptom of an underlying condition, such as age-related hearing loss, ear injury or a circulatory system disorder” (Mayo Clinic 2022).

Nad and shabd yoga adherents balk at the suggestion that what they are hearing is merely tinnitus misdiagnosed. They argue that there is a significant difference between the two because shabd elevates while tinnitus irritates. The conflation of tinnitus with the inner sound current is a complicated one and needs further research since even shabd yoga literature describes sounds that have no mystical import. For example, Sawan Singh, the second guru proper in the Radha Soami Satsang Beas lineage, in giving advice to an American disciple categorically states in *Spiritual Gems* that “eight of the [sounds] are local, but the Bell and Conch are connected with higher regions” (S. Singh 1965: 127). By using the term “local” Sawan Singh may be referring to something akin to tinnitus. In any case sound, like light, is not singular but a spectrum of different frequencies and this important distinction must be considered before reducing all internal sounds to the rushing of blood in the head. However, even tinnitus is not yet fully understood by science and it may well be that there is a wider spectrum to how and why certain sounds generate a feeling of bliss and upliftment and others do not. The tinnitus label is most likely too general and a more comprehensive and precise terminology needs to be developed. Arguably, a detailed understanding of neuroanatomy in the future may eliminate our present confusion surrounding what these inner sounds may portend.

Nevertheless, one thing is certain: the meditational practice of nad and shabd yoga is given high praise in several Hindu and Sikh scriptures and it has continually grown more popular over the past two centuries both in India and around the globe.

The History of Nad and Shabd Yoga

In the early commentaries made upon the Vedas known as the Upanishads, much is made of a primeval sound known as Aum/Om that is equated with Brahman/God. One of the earliest such texts that elaborates on the sacred sound is the Chandogya Upanishad, which scholars believe was composed nine to six centuries before the advent of Christianity. The Sanskrit text begins with प्रथमोऽध्यायः ॥ ओमित्येतदक्षरमुद्गीथमुपासीत । ओमिति ह्युद्गायति तस्योपव्याख्यानम्, which Swami Lokeshwarananda (2017: verse 1.1.1.) translates as “Om is the closest word to Brahman. Recite this Om as if you are worshipping Brahman. How you recite this Om is being explained.”

A number of other Upanishads elaborate on the power and efficacy of Om, but the one text that elaborates in detail about listening to the inner sound as a foundational spiritual practice is the Nadabindu Upanishad. Scholars are still debating about when it was composed, with dates ranging as far back as the fourth century BCE to the first century CE (Paul 2006). This core text has had a major influence on other yogic manuals, particularly about how to listen to the inner sound and which sounds in hierarchical order one should attend to. A key excerpt from the Nadabindu Upanishad explains the yoga of sound in its essence:

The yogin being in the *siḍdhāsana* (posture) and practising the *vaishṇavīmuḍrā*, should always hear the internal sound through the right ear. In the beginning of his practice, he hears many loud sounds. They gradually increase in pitch and are heard more and more subtly. At first, the sounds are like those proceeding from – the ocean, clouds, kettle-drum, and cataracts: in the middle (stage) those proceeding from *maṛḍala* (a musical instrument), bell, and horn. At the last stage, those proceeding from tinkling bells, flute, *vīṇā* (a musical instrument), and bees. Thus he hears many such sounds more and more subtle. When he comes to that stage when the sound of the great kettle-drum is being heard, he should try to distinguish only sounds more and more subtle. (Aiyar 1914: 257)

The literary structure of the Nadabindu Upanishad has become a template for other, later iterations of nad yoga, which almost invariably follow the guidelines laid out two millennia ago. First the practitioner is advised to “always hear the internal sound through the right ear” (Aiyar 1914: 257). Later shabd yoga groups in the Sant and Radhasoami traditions will make this a cardinal feature