

LISTENING TO THE INNER SOUND

The Perennial Practice of Shabd Yoga

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Greetings:

I am extremely honored to back that the Dayalbagh Educational Institute once again and to be part of this prestigious event. Thank you so very much for having me. My talk today is on the perennial practice of Shabd Yoga. Let's begin....

INTRODUCTION

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 3 or so pounds, within its enfolded compound resides the most remarkable feature in the known universe: consciousness.

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 inwards to discover where this very consciousness arises from and explore what possibilities it portends.

Humans have developed a variety of tools to alter their awareness and make it possible to venture into hitherto uncharted territories of the mind. One of the most ancient techniques that have become increasingly popular over time (particularly in the modern era) is a

meditational practice of Shabd or Nad Yoga, centered on listening to subtler and subtler inner sounds.

Shabd Yoga has a long history and can be found in different religious traditions around the world (ranging from Gnostic Christianity to Islamic Sufism to Tibetan Buddhism). In this presentation I will briefly explore the possible origination of shabd yoga and trace it over time (in its various manifestations) up until the present day. I am especially interested in showing how Shiv Dayal Singh (more honorifically known as Soami Ji Maharaj) and his teachings have greatly influenced a number of shabd yoga related movements around world.

PART ONE

The Biological Heritage of Humankind

It is intriguing to speculate about how listening to inner sounds first originated among early humankind, long before it became codified as a practice. There are several hypotheses that offer tantalizing suggestions of how early humans may have first experienced shabd, including early Near-Death Experiences, sleep paralysis, extended periods of sensory deprivation, chemical alteration, and more.

NDEs: Near-Death Experiences may have played a vital role in the origination of shabd yoga for early humans. We know today that a significant number of patients who have had an NDE reported hearing a beautiful melody. One such patient recalled the following:

“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. It flowed unobtrusively like a glassy river, quietly

worshipful, excitingly edifying, and totally comforting. It provided a reassuring type of comfort much like a protective blanket that whispered peace and love. I had never sensed anything like it. Perhaps angelic would describe it.”

We can certainly speculate, given our neuro-anatomies, that this was also experienced by our early ancestors.

Sleep Paralysis: Sleep paralysis may be another important factor to consider in understanding the origination of shabd yoga. In sleep paralysis the sleeper is awake or half awake but is aware one cannot move—there is no voluntary muscle movement. One experiences a feeling of immobility, a numbness where one feels as if frozen.

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 (not merely dreamy hallucinations) and a feeling of numbness.

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. Jagat Singh (1884-1951), the third guru proper in the Beas lineage, argued, "The acid test of withdrawal [in meditation] is numbness."

In the article, *The Science of Going Within: Exploring the Neurobiological Basis of Shabd Yoga Meditation* (Integral World, April 2013), we hypothesized that “shabd yoga practitioners who experience the onslaught of numbness in their extremities 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 or not the neurotransmitters

gamma-aminobutyric acid (or GABA) and glycine levels are operative.”

This is not to reduce shabd yoga meditation merely to biochemistry but rather to show that the two are not mutually exclusive and may actually correlate in quantifiable/testable ways.

If shabd yoga meditation is indeed a neurobiological process then there should be telltale signs of such that can be quantified by accurately measuring these levels of neurotransmitters in the brain while one is feeling the sensation of conscious paralysis while meditating.

Thus, it is very 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 only to certain geographical regions, but is rather a biological inherency which can be accessed by anyone, anywhere, and anytime.

Yet, it is nevertheless evident that the evolution of this practice has cultural and historical variants that have developed over time. And India spiritual systems, in particular, have defined and refined the technique and have given the most exhaustive treatment of the subject in the world.

Some of the earliest evidence we have of meditation comes from India’s Indus Valley Civilization nearly 5000 years ago. Early figurines discovered in Mohenjo-daro and Harappa in the Indus Valley, which date back to before the Vedas, suggestively indicate that some form of yoga was practiced.

**I remember years ago teaching at the University of London through a study abroad program and taking my students across the street to the British Museum Indus Valley display to witness the clay figurines sitting in yoga posture.

Yan Y. Dhyansky has given a lucid argument in his groundbreaking article, *The Indus Valley Origin of a Yoga Practice*, that the practice of withdrawing one's consciousness from the body has a long precedence and can be dated to long before the Vedas were finalized.

PART TWO

The Religious-Historical Trajectory

Given that listening to the inner sound to elevate one's consciousness is a structural potential within all human beings and given that it most likely has a naturalistic component, 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 music seems to be invariably intertwined to the theology of the local region. In other words, Christianity's understanding of shabd yoga (a term we will 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 shabd yoga, in other words, is relativized by the historical time and context in which it is practiced.

This, of course, doesn't minimize its transcendent character but only underlines that how we interpret our inner experiences is culturally variable.

Selected References to Listening to the Inner Sound across Cultures

I thought it would be useful to select references to the inner sound in the world's religions as a cross-cultural reference. The following is by no means exhaustive, but does provide a tantalizing glimpse into the universality of shabd, even if some of the examples only tap into its preliminary stages.

Let's begin with Hinduism and the Upanishads. In the Nadabindu Upanishads shabd yoga is clearly discussed. It states:

NADABINDU UPANISHAD

The yogin ...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 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.

HATHA YOGA PRADIPIKA

In the Hatha Yoga Pradipika, a 15th century Hindu text which is in part derived from older Sanskrit material, it has a very similar theme. It discusses how when one practices meditation “a sort of happiness is experienced in the vacuum of the heart, and sounds, like various tinkling sounds of ornaments, are heard in the body. The Yogî should hear the sound inside his right ear, with collected mind. In the beginning, the sounds heard are of great variety and very loud; but, as the practice increases, they become more and more subtle.”

TIBETAN BOOK OF THE DEAD

Tibetan Buddhism also references inner sounds and lights in the Tibetan Book of the Dead. It states:

From the midst of that radiance, the natural sound of Reality, reverberating like a thousand thunders simultaneously sounding, will come. That is the natural sound of thine own real self. Be not daunted thereby, nor terrified, nor awed. O nobly-born, five-colored radiances ... vibrating and dazzling like colored threads, flashing, radiant, and transparent, glorious and awe-inspiring, will ... strike against thy heart, so bright that the eye cannot bear to look upon them. Within those radiances, the natural sound of the Truth will reverberate like a thousand thunders. The sound will come with a rolling reverberation. Fear not. Flee not. Be not terrified. Know them (i.e., these sounds) to be (of) ... thine own inner light.”

GNOSTICISM

For me one of the more interesting examples of shabd yoga comes from 1st and 2nd century Gnosticism. While at UCSB I worked with the lead scholar of Gnosticism, Birger Pearson, and under his tutelage I decided to write my Master’s thesis on showing the similarities between Gnosticism and Radhasoami, focusing my attention on shabd yoga.

In reading the Nag Hammadi literature I came across numerable references to “leaving the body,” “to seeing a great flood of light and hearing mystical sounds”, and to being transformed by all of this. The Pistis Sophia text is filled with such imagery.

Yet, one of my favorite passages is in the Trimorphic Protennoia where the gnostic writer clearly discusses the inner light and sound. Speaking as though in the voice of God it reads:

I cast Sound into the ears of those who know me. And I am inviting you into the exalted, perfect Light. Moreover (as for) this (Light), when you enter it you will be glorified ... you will become gloriously glorious, the way you first were when you were . And I hid myself in everyone and revealed [myself] within them, and every mind seeking me longed for me, for it is I who gave shape to the All when it had no form. It is through me that the Voice originated ... And it is a Word, by virtue of a Sound; it was sent to illumine those who dwell in darkness...

RICHARD ROLLE AND THE FIRE OF LOVE

In Christianity, the Christian mystic Richard Rolle of the 14th century recalled his mystical experience:

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. In visible 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.

HAZRAT INAYAT KHAN AND THE MYSTICISM OF SOUND

In Sufi Islam there is indeed reference to mystical sounds. In fact in Hazrat Inayat Khan's 1923 book, 'The Mysticism of Sound', is all about shabd. He writes:

Moses heard this sound on Mount Sinai when in communion with God, and the same word was audible to Christ when absorbed in his heavenly Father in the wilderness. Shiva heard the same anahad nada

during his amadhi in the cave of the Himalayas. The flute of Krishna is symbolic of the same sound. This sound is the source of all revelation to the Masters to whom it is revealed from within. It is because of this that they know and teach one and the same truth.

THE DIVINE MELODY IN SRI GURU GRANTH SAHIB

And in Sikhism in the Guru Granth Sahib, there is much discussion of the Divine Melody. It reads:

The Unstruck Melody constantly vibrates within; my mind is exalted and uplifted—I am lovingly absorbed in the Lord.—Guru Amar Das

The Unstruck Melody of the Sovereign Lord's Harp vibrates.—Kabir

PART THREE

Radhasoami and its Influence on Shabdism

Undoubtedly, shabdism has a long history on this planet, going back possibly to early human kind and certainly manifesting through the various traditions. But perhaps no one has had such a significant role to play in shabd yoga as Shiva Dayal Singh has.

It is remarkable to note that a small spiritual movement founded by Shiv Dayal Singh in the mid-19th century would over time have a worldwide impact on the practice of shabd yoga. This has occurred primarily because the Radhasoami tradition has blossomed into a large number of sub-branches throughout India and abroad. These same groups have, in turn, witnessed further splintering and there has been a surprising contingent of new religious movements (such as Eckankar, MasterPath, MSIA, and Quan Yin) that, though distancing themselves from a direct lineal connection to Radhasoami, owe a large debt to Shiv Dayal Singh and his successors.

Much of this is due to the clarity with which various Radhasoami masters have explained the path of surat shabd yoga. As my husband pointed out, the modernization of shabd yoga owes much to Shiv Dayal Singh's core text, *Sar Bachan* (both prose and poetry) (1884) and the numerous writings from his main successor, Rai Salig Ram, particularly *Radhasoami Mat Prakash* (1896). Later gurus in both the Agra and Beas branches have published extensively in English, Hindi, Urdu, and Punjabi.

Yet, Shiv Dayal Singh's ideas have been modified by various offshoot groups and gurus over the years for their own purposes. This is especially the case with those new religious movements that have attempted to genealogically dissociate themselves from the Agra paramapara and have created their own mythological lineages.

Eckankar, as founded by Paul Twitchell (who was duly initiated by Kirpal Singh of Ruhani Satsang in 1955 and has heavily plagiarized from Radhasoami texts), is a prime example of a group that has invented a master lineage but which nevertheless advocates a modified version of shabd yoga. Also included in this category are John-Roger Hinkins of MSIA, who has developed his own unique spiritual cosmology replete with ascending sounds which he claims will help accessing the higher planes of consciousness; Gary Olsen, founder of MasterPath, who has mimicked much of Radhasoami teachings, but without the ethical restrictions; and Ching Hai, who has popularized listening to the inner sound via her Quan Yin technique. Formerly she was a representative of Thakar Singh, one of the alleged successors of Kirpal Singh. And the list goes on.

What is most intriguing about all these various offshoots, besides their attempt to deny their indebtedness to Radhasoami (from which they have all gleaned much of their understanding of shabd yoga) is how they have popularized the idea of the sound current, even if they have altered the techniques and the theology surrounding it from Shiv Dayal Singh's original impetus.

The spread of shabd yoga is primarily due to increasing fractionalization of Radhasoami and related movements over the past one hundred and fifty years. Thus while some may lament that the teachings of Shiv Dayal Singh have splintered off in sometimes very contentious directions, the fact remains that it was because of this very splintering that shabd yoga has becoming increasingly popular around the world.

A Google search for the word “shabd” or “sound current” will display over 289,000 results, ranging from simple Wikipedia entries to the Chopra Foundation to obscure religious seminars such as the “Sound Current Healing Seminar” conducted by a woman by the name of Ashtara Sasha White.

No doubt some may rightly deplore the commercialization of shabd yoga and the alteration of some of its core teachings (particularly doing away with vegetarianism and charging money for initiation or membership), but despite such redactions it is remarkable that a relatively unknown mystic adept living in Agra in the 19th century would over time have such a tremendous impact on the spiritual practices of millions worldwide.

Today, there is a growing movement among some shabd yoga adherents (spearheaded most prominently by the current spiritual leader of Radhasoami Dayalbagh, Prem Saran Satsangi) to present the practice and teachings of listening to the inner sound within a modern scientific framework, even going so far as to conduct quantifiable experiments on seasoned meditators measuring their brain wave patterns. This is a very significant development since it opens the field of shabd yoga to a wider, more secular audience that may have no religious or satsang affiliation.

In conclusion, we have seen how listening to the inner sound is not merely a cultural or historical artifact but is rather an inherent structural potential within all human beings to turn their attention within and achieve higher states of consciousness. However, we have

also noted how shabd yoga, though first articulated by yogis and mystics in India, has been modified through history due to varying cultural influences. We have witnessed an increase in its popularity through such saints as Kabir, Namdev, Dadu, Paltu Sahib, Tulsi Sahib, and other nirguna bhakti poets. But undoubtedly the most influential exponent of shabd yoga practice is Shiv Dayal Singh, the founder of Radhasoami, whose influence has grown exponentially over the past one hundred and fifty years.

Alfred North Whitehead once quipped that all of philosophy is merely a footnote to Plato. Analogously, it may not be hyperbolic to say that the vast majority of shabd yoga teachings today are but varied extensions of what Shiv Dayal Singh himself taught publicly from 1861 to his death in 1878.

Since we are gathered here to celebrate Shiv Dayal Singh's 200 birth anniversary, perhaps no greater tribute can be bequeathed to him than the irrefutable fact that his teachings are promulgated (even if in diluted form) worldwide and that he continues to directly influence the spiritual lives of millions.

Thank You: On behalf of my entire family I would like to thank the Dayalbagh community for allowing us the privilege of celebrating Shiv Dayal Singh's 200th birth anniversary. It has been a great honor to be here.

Radhasoami!