



CHINESE / ASIAN MEDICINE

## Sound Advice on Tibetan Singing Bowls

Bill Reddy, LAc, Dipl. Ac.

### WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

- Tibetan singing bowls are made from seven "sacred" metals, representing heavenly bodies or planets: gold (the Sun), silver (the Moon), mercury (Mercury), copper (Venus), iron (Mars), lead (Saturn) and tin (Jupiter).
- Sound waves can change molecular structure and can resonate with our body and brain. Some refer to singing bowl therapy as "sound bathing," since it feels like the sound is washing over and through the body.
- Lack of evidence does not mean lack of effectiveness. The use of singing bowls goes back as early as the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC, and ancient knowledge cannot be disregarded, especially in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Nikola Tesla's famous statement, "*If you want to find the secrets of the universe, think in terms of energy, frequency, and vibration,*" rings true today, more than a century later. Twenty-first century lives still employ millennia-old practices such as *qigong*, yoga and sound therapy; however, the first two have withstood the scrutiny of randomized, controlled trials and emerged as respected healing practices.

Can Tibetan healing bowls survive such modern-day scrutiny? What are they and how are they applied clinically? (Full disclosure - I've employed one in my practice for more than a decade, and even used it within a hospital system, conveniently omitting it when charting in Epic, and asking my patients not to rat me out to my superiors.)

Healing Bowls: The Basics

Yogapedia defines a singing bowl as "*a particular kind of standing bell that is inverted and played by rotating a mallet around the outer rim in order to create a resonant, musical note. It can also be*

*played in the more traditional way by simply striking the edge of the bowl. They range in size from just a few centimeters to a meter across."*

Interestingly, they're made from seven "sacred" metals, representing heavenly bodies or planets: containing gold (the Sun), silver (the Moon), mercury (Mercury), copper (Venus), iron (Mars), lead (Saturn) and tin (Jupiter).

Tibetan singing bowls (also known as Himalayan singing bowls) vary in size, shape and frequency range; the most common styles include *Thadobati*, *Jambati*, *Naga*, *Mani*, *Utabati*, *Manipuri*, *Lingam* (aka *Lingham*), and *Remuna*. These bowls are hand crafted by skilled artisans; each one unique in its design and sound.

English translations of the Tibetan Buddhist Canon are hard to come by, so specific references to singing bowls in the ancient literature are challenging to include in this article. But other online references suggest that similar to the Taoist mystery schools, their knowledge of chanting and ceremonies using these bowls have been a closely held secret.

Some suggest that they're used not only for healing, but also for astral projection and shifting between dimensions. (I've got singing bowls going on in the background via Pandora while writing this, but so far, no astral projection.) Although PubMed at NIH National Library of Medicine doesn't have much to offer (yielding five results: two German studies, one Italian and two English-language studies), other databases have more information from various researchers in a number of countries.

#### How Do They Work?

Apparently, sound waves can change molecular structure and can resonate with our body and brain.<sup>1</sup> Some refer to singing bowl therapy as "sound bathing," since it feels like the sound is washing over and through the body.

Theories include that the bowls create binaural beats which lead to "brain entrainment" whereby brainwave states can be altered during the session.<sup>2</sup> As you may be aware, brainwaves are arranged according to various frequencies:

- *Gamma* is more than 30 Hz and usually has to do with processing information from different parts of the brain.
- *Beta* is from 12-30 Hz and is considered alert consciousness, concentration, focus or anxiety.
- *Alpha* is from 8-12 Hz with higher amplitudes compared with beta; and represents relaxation, calmness and being at peace.
- *Theta* is from 4-8 Hz with even greater amplitude, and occurs during light sleep, daydreaming, meditation or deep relaxation.
- *Delta* is less than 4 Hz with the greatest amplitude and lowest frequency, and usually occurs during deep, dreamless sleep or meditation.

The goal of sound bathing is to ease your brain into the 12 Hz or lower frequencies.

Another angle is that singing bowls can affect our biofields,<sup>3</sup> which, in turn, can improve our health and well-being. Finally, there are scientists who believe there is vagus nerve activation during sound healing that induces feelings of well-being.<sup>4</sup>

#### What Does the Science Conclude About Their Health Value?

Quite a bit actually. Studies evaluating EEG, MRI and PET scans demonstrated that harmonic overtones can influence the parasympathetic nervous system, promote healing and spiritual awareness, and reduce stress.<sup>5</sup>

A study looking at stress and heart rate variability (HRV), where higher variability is attributed to greater emotional regulation,<sup>6</sup> demonstrated a significant reduction in stress and an increase in HRV with only 20 minutes in a singing bowl environment.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, the study confirmed that the use of singing bowls increased parasympathetic tone in the participants compared with those who just rested in a quiet room.

A systematic review published in 2020<sup>8</sup> on human health effects of singing bowls evaluated four studies published in peer-reviewed journals and concluded that "*as the evidence suggests positive health effects, we recommend that future studies consider the effect of singing bowl therapies using more robust study methods,*" but that "*given there were few studies and the potential risk of methodological bias, we cannot recommend singing bowl therapies at this stage.*"

However, keep in mind that lack of evidence does not mean lack of effectiveness. The use of singing bowls goes back as early as the 5th century BC, and ancient knowledge cannot be disregarded, especially in the 21st century.

#### My Recommendation for Use in The Clinic Setting

My personal recommendation is to go to a store that offers a broad variety of singing bowls (hopefully when there aren't many patrons trying them out), and find which one resonates with you. I'll place the bowl on *Ren 17* or *Ren 12* and tone it for a few minutes, allowing the sound to permeate both me and my patient.

Afterward, following Lao Tzu's advice, take as much time at the end as the beginning, and let the patient breathe slowly and evenly for a few breaths before removing the bowl and letting your patient reassemble themselves.

#### References

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