



Meditative Melodies

How Sound Deepens Meditation

by Dudley Evenson

When life is stressful, we know we need to relax. The question is how. Many wonderful ways involve combining music with a meditation practice. Although we can't always control our surroundings, we can learn to control how we react to and internalize what happens around us.

On the value of meditation and mindfulness, Jon Kabat-Zinn, founder of the Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care and Society, at the University of Massachusetts Medical School, observes, "When we do studies of this, we find we can change our brains. We can change our relationship to our emotions. We can change our relationship to the actuality of things in ways that are healing. The immune system responds."

Because sound affects us on all levels—emotional, mental and physical—combining musical processes with our meditation practice can be highly effective in easing stress. Cultures worldwide have long used music to lift the spirit and enhance meditation and healing.

Choosing Meditation Music

Choose recorded music that helps calm mental chatter. Here are some criteria.

- ✓ **Slow rhythms.** These entrain bodily systems, including the heartbeat, pulse, digestion, respiration and muscle functioning, to a more natural rhythm.
- ✓ **Natural sounds.** They give a sense of peace.
- ✓ **Nurturing tones.** Typically, these are clear, warm and gentle.
- ✓ **Uplifting, not gloomy.** The music should give rise to a sense of joy and beauty.
- ✓ **Absence of hooks and refrains;** avoid repetition and familiarity that engage the analytical mind.
- ✓ **Flowing.** It is soothing and feels akin to nature.
- ✓ **Sub-audio frequencies.** The presence of these is an optional way to entrain brainwaves to an alpha or theta state that allows relaxation and healing to occur.
- ✓ **Intention.** It's important for both the musician and listener.

Here are several self-generated ways to further enhance meditation.

Controlling Breath

We can live without food for weeks and water for days, but breath for only minutes.

A simple way to begin breath work is by taking a fast, full inhalation, followed by a long, slow exhalation. With practice, both breath control and stress levels will improve.

Vocal Toning

This uses the human voice to produce elongated vowel tones or humming sounds that can empower meditation. It also slows and lengthens our exhalation by putting a brake on the breath.

Begin by taking a deep breath and then, with the mouth open, make a simple vowel tone such as ahh or ohh. With the exhalation pushing out a sound, the tone follows naturally.

Mantra and Chant

Mantras can keep the demons of our monkey mind from distracting us. The word means “mind protection” in Sanskrit. A mantra is characterized by a short sound or phrase that carries a vibration and frequency that extends beyond the simple meaning of the words. Using mantras can help overcome mental chatter, de-stress and set us up for an expansion of consciousness.

Dr. Herbert Benson, founder of the Mind/Body Medical Institute at Harvard Medical School, in Boston, documented a phenomenon he named “the relaxation response”. His research discovered that those that repeated mantras for even 10 minutes a day experienced physiological changes—a reduced heart rate, slower metabolism and lower stress levels, all of which allow the body to return to a more natural state of wellness.

Singing Affirmations

Research led by Carnegie Mellon University’s David Creswell found that people using self-affirmation also can protect against the damaging effects of stress on problem-solving performance.

An affirmation is a positive statement spoken in the present tense asserting that a desired goal is already achieved. With sufficient repetition and focused intention, declaration becomes reality. Adding a melody to our affirmation and singing it repeatedly enhances its power.

Mind-body expert Dr. Deepak Chopra agrees, stating, “Music helps to take the affirmations to a deeper level of the mind so that a process of emotional and spiritual transformation can start.”

We are constantly affirming in our mind what we believe. With perseverance, repetition and steadfast belief in them, the words of our affirmations become a part of us. Before long, we notice we are achieving what we may have previously thought was impossible. Accessing the rich array of music and sound modalities available can help deepen meditation, decrease stress and allow us to benefit from a higher and much improved quality of life.

Dudley Evenson and her husband, Dean, are sound healing pioneers who have produced award-winning music since 1979 through their label, Soundings of the Planet. Their new book is Quietening the Monkey Mind: How to Meditate with Music. Learn more at Soundings.com.