

# Sound Baths: Using Sound to Induce States of Deep Relaxation and Letting Go

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## In the beginning was the sound...

In many traditions, the universe was created through the power of sound: The **BIG BANG!**

'In the beginning was the **word**...' (Gospel of John (1:1))

'And God **said** "Let there be light..." (Book of Genesis (1:3))

**Nada Brahma** (Nada = sound; Brahma = God/the universe)

## How does sound affect the human body?

Understanding how sound affects the human body is fundamental to performing sound baths. Practitioners aim to use sound in a calming, safe and supportive way, to encourage the activation of their audience's parasympathetic nervous systems required for deep rest and relaxation. There are four main ways that sound affects the human body:

**Physiologically:** Our bodies are made up of around 70% water. Sound waves travel faster through liquid than air so we can physically feel sound vibrations moving through our body. This in turn affects how we physically respond to our sound environment. Sounds that indicate our environment is safe, such as the gentle, calm lapping of waves on the beach, or the sounds of the dawn chorus in the summer, help to lower cortisol levels in the body (fight/flight hormone), and in turn activate the parasympathetic nervous system, lowering our heart rate. However, sudden, sharp, loud and unexpected sounds have the opposite effect and will cause our cortisol levels to increase, thus raising our heart rate.

**Psychologically:** We psychologically associate sounds and music with certain things, for example, suddenly hearing a song on the radio that we haven't heard since we were teenagers can momentarily take us back to that time in our life. Sound is used psychologically by companies in their advertising campaigns (known as sonic branding) in a way to sell products and services to consumers.

**Cognitively:** We cannot listen to two people talking to us about different things at the same time as each other. We may hear some words from each person, but not every word in context. This is an example of how we cognitively process sound. Similarly, repetitive rhythmic sounds played on instruments rich in overtones (e.g. frame drums, rattles, gongs, etc.), can cognitively trigger altered states of consciousness, required for the body to enter states of deep relaxation.

**Behaviourally:** When we hear loud roadworks or any other loud sound outside that we cannot control, our natural behaviour is to move as fast as possible away from the sound source. Likewise, listening to music (especially Classical music) on the radio whilst driving can influence the driver to change speed in time to the music.

## What is a sound bath?

During a sound bath, the practitioner 'bathes' their clients (fully clothed) in a live improvised composition. A sound bath may include a variety of instruments to take the listener on a sonic journey. Sound baths require creative skills in realtime composition (intuitive improvisation).

## What instruments are played in a group sound bath?

The instruments you will experience in a group sound bath vary from practitioner to practitioner. The most commonly used instruments are metal singing bowls, crystal singing bowls, gongs, shamanic drums, rattles, handpan, and wind chimes. I work mainly with metal Himalayan singing bowls, but many other instruments feature in my sessions, including voice and shruti box. I vary my setup from session to session, so each sound bath is unique.

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### **Are instruments tuned to the chakras?**

The association of Western musical pitches associated with the chakras is a sales gimmick to sell more instruments. The same goes for instruments supposedly tuned to various planets. *Why?* People are willing to pay more for an instrument with a 'story'. However, sounds that *are* energy-based around the chakras are the Sanskrit seed sound syllables: LAM, VAM, RAM, YAM, HUM, OM. The person chanting the Sanskrit syllables determines the pitch(s) that feels right. The chanter may even chant each seed syllable on the same pitch. The important part is chanting from the heart with focused intention.

### **What happens during a group sound bath?**

The exact structure of a sound bath will vary from practitioner to practitioner, and even from session to session. For my sound baths, clients are invited to either lie down on a yoga mat with pillows and blankets, or to sit in a chair, whichever is most comfortable for them. At my evening sound baths, I also use ambient lighting (fairy lights and an 'aurora' projector) to make the sessions feel more immersive. I start with a short c.10-15 minute guided meditation (accompanied by an instrument) to help ease clients into a relaxed state before the main sounding of the instruments for c.40-45 minutes. When I have finished playing, I usually leave a minute or two of silence before gently calling the clients back into an ordinary state of consciousness (a 'normal' waking state). When everyone has fully woken up, if they feel comfortable in doing so, and if they would like to, clients are invited to share any experiences with the group.

### **What do clients experience during a group sound bath?**

Each sound bath will be experienced differently by everyone who attends it. The following are some of the common experiences that clients have shared with me after they have attended my group sound baths:

- Deep relaxation and overall calm, weightlessness, bliss.
- Sleep: Some clients have a good sleep during the sound bath and feel recharged at the end.
- Altered states of consciousness: Some clients experience spiritual journeys through an altered state induced by the sounds. Some have shared that they see flashes of colour, animal and other spirit guides, as well as scenic landscapes, and connection to the elements. Some have even reported that they have connected with the spirits of loved ones.
- Body temperature: Many clients feel a drop in their body temperature (owing to their relaxed state) by the end of a sound bath.
- Tingling sensations: Certain sound vibrations can cause tingling sensations down their body, especially down their legs, feet and toes, as well as in their hands and fingers.
- Clearing of energy block and emotional release: As we all experience the same sound differently to the next person, not every client will find every sound or instrument relaxing. Some sounds/instruments may trigger an emotional release.

### **Sound bath training**

Sound baths are an ever-growing holistic wellbeing modality. Working with sound in such a way is an unregulated discipline. While there are numerous places to train offering 'diplomas' of various levels, they are not connected with any university departments or degrees. For sound bath training, I advise that you train with an experienced practitioner one-to-one.

More information about sound therapy: <https://nicholaspeters.co.uk/sound-mantra-therapy/>

Listen to my singing bowl and nature recordings on Spotify: <https://bit.ly/bowlsandnature>

Listen to my singing bowl and nature recordings on YouTube: <https://bit.ly/youtubebowls>