en-chanting the world:
the healing magic of vocal harmonics

Jill has been teaching workshops internationally for over thirty-five years, sharing with others ways to use their voices and offering them a tool for deep meditation, healing and transformation. She says one of the effects of chanting is the dissolution of boundaries, which allows for something new to take place in the psyche and body of a person.

Her goal is to ‘re-enchant the world’ through chant, explaining that when you liberate the voice, you liberate the individual, and thereby the return to a more harmonious way of living with others and the environment.

Matthew, a participant in the workshop I attended, shared the following comment: “I feel moved by the power of the group and how the sound seems to break through the everyday barriers between all of us. Amazing for me is how I felt a sense of connecting with everybody, and felt this closeness to people who are living their everyday lives very differently.”

Chanting is an ancient practice used in different cultural traditions to create harmony in body and spirit, and foster communion. During her workshops Jill teaches techniques learned first-hand from Tibetan, Tuvan and Mongolian masters, American Indians and shamans and through personal exploration. One of the skills she teaches is overtone chanting, which involves producing simultaneous notes octaves apart. Jill demonstrates a technique using a single note, and how to alter the resonant cavities of the body to produce bell-like sounds simultaneous to the lower fundamental note. These high sounds, or overtones, are component parts of the one note that are filtered in such a way that they become louder than the note itself.

The intervals between the fundamental note and the overtones correspond to mathematical patterns of order and harmony found throughout the universe. When we listen to them, or even better, produce them ourselves, we alter the molecular structure of our bodies and the vibration of the space around us to heal not only our physical bodies, but also to promote the transformation of limiting thought patterns that cause dis-ease.

Central to the practice is the art of listening. Jill emphasizes that it is not just making sound that is important, but that being able to listen to is essential: “in this way you complete a circuit of attention and it is this circuit of attention that enables you to go beyond the thinking mind.”

Underlying all Jill’s teaching is the premise that the voice is the key to spiritual transformation. A practitioner of Tibetan Buddhism, she claims the Tibetan tradition is where the most precise understanding of the use of sound and the voice has survived. Jill explains that the sound of the voice is directly linked through the breath to the activities of the mind, and through working

As a sound-healing practitioner I’ve been exploring the effects of sound on the body using different instruments, including the Australian didgeridu and Tibetan singing bowls, but it’s the power of the voice that most interests me, and I think it is the most powerful for healing. Last winter I attended a vocal workshop in the UK with sound healing pioneer Jill Purce, who introduced me to sacred chant. Since returning home, I have been practising the techniques that I have learned and I feel my energy shifting and notice positive transformations in my everyday relationships with others and with life.
with the voice we can learn to enter the state
the Tibetans know as 'rigpa', the awareness
which combines emptiness with clarity and
leads ultimately to illumination. In Tibetan
philosophy the voice acts as an intermediary
between the subtle realm of mind and the
more physical realm of body. "A person's voice
is their magic."

Following is an excerpt of an interview with
Jill Purce:

T: Acknowledging the power of sound and
the voice for transformation, have you
ever used your voice to heal an individual
outside of the workshops you teach?

J: My main focus in all that I do is to get
everyone using their own voices. The
whole point for me about the voice is that it's a reclamation of one's own power
and ability to participate in the resonant
nature of all things, of life, of each other,
of community. Real healing happens when
you are part of something much bigger
than yourself, whether that's the spirit,
community or nature.

T: What prompted you to first practise
Tibetan overtone chanting?

J: The kind of overtone chanting I'm doing
is not Tibetan. Overtone chanting
indigenously is found in Central Asia
– in Tibet, Mongolia and Tuva. The form
that I teach is not Tibetan, which has a
very deep fundamental and one overtone
over the top. It's more like Mongolian or
Tuvan where you have a slightly higher
fundamental note and then varying
harmonics on the top of it.

Traditionally different cultures have
different ways of dividing the scale. The
overtone structure, or series, is not a
scale. It's how the geometry of nature
sounds when you allow it to be heard.

For healing purposes we need to work
with the pure intervals that put us into
resonance with the world we live in. That's what happens when you chant
the harmonics. It's not necessary to
sound like a Tuvan or Mongolian, but
to use something of the same technique
that enables you to make the harmonics
audible above your singing.

T: Was it simply this knowledge that
prompted you to seek out and study with
them?

J: When I started I was interested in the
power of sound to bring about form, in
sound as a creative force in the universe
that every tradition tells us about. Then
I was led to the question – what kind of
sound is the most powerful sound? The
most powerful sound is the human voice.
The true instrument as instrument, is the voice. This is the
most sacred instrument of all.

In general we are an instrument which is
not being played, getting rusty and out of
tune. We have to reclaim our own voices,
our own power and the resonance with
community, with nature, with ourselves,
and with the clarity of mind that comes
from the practice.

The most important thing about the voice
is that it enables us, by making a sound
and by attending to the sound we are
making, to come into the present moment,
no longer trapped by regrets of the past
and dreads of the future and caught in the
grasp of the anxious mind. It enables us to
escape from the limitation of mind into a
state of clarity where true healing lies.

T: Would you say that chanting in groups
is essential or is solo chanting equally
beneficial?

J: They're very different activities. I think
they're both important. Chanting in
community is one thing, an extraordinary
one and very powerful, but doing sonorous
yogas individually is also very important.

T: For someone who's never used their voice
and is shy about singing is it helpful if they
sing along with songs that they're drawn
to?

J: Yes, absolutely, definitely. Also, just go
around humming. Sit peacefully in a
corner, light a candle, and just hum.
Listen to yourself while you're humming.
That in itself is a very simple practice
which everybody can do. Or when you're
vacuuming, hum along with your vacuum
cleaner – there are all sorts of things you
can do like that.

T: From my experience of this week-end
workshop with you, I'm guessing that over
the course of your teaching that you've
seen many transformations occur?

J: Yes, I've seen the most extraordinary
healings and transformations. There were
people who couldn't sing, that joined a
choir and started singing, and people
whose lives were a misery that became
utterly joyful. There have been countless
physical healings and emotional healings
– all kinds.

Jill Purce teaches weekend workshops in 'Inner
Sound and Voice' and week intensives in 'Ritual
and Resonance – Healing the Family'. Visit www.
healingvoice.com for her current schedule. Tamara
Watson teaches 'Music of the Heart' workshops; visit
www.bodymandala.net for more information.