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Tuning Out of This World: Silence and Mantra at an Urban Ashram in Zygmunt Bauman's Liquid Modernity

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Feeling 'solid' is no longer an option as we are fraught with uncertainty in Zygmunt Bauman's (1925–2017) liquid modernity. The discussion of strategies to deal with uncertainties is open to educators. How might educators engage inner silence, sound, and re-sounding in order to navigate uncertain waters? If sounds are educational and the listener can render external sounds into embodied meaning, then it follows—the one who resounds is also able to render meaning from within. Furthering the notion of primal embodied sounds, including breath and mantra, I explore accessing an inner-technology. This article presents how a turn toward an inner experience of sound articulates new ways of being and knowing, and functioning in the world. In order to document how silence and sound are perceived and embodied, I begin with explorations of silence, breathing, and mantra (sacred repeated words or script). An introduction to my research site and participants provides a brief outline of my ethnographic research with residents of an urban ashram in a major city in Canada. I provide excerpts from interviews with 9 meditators who regularly attend early-morning *sadhana* (daily spiritual practice from 4:00 AM to 6:30 AM). To conclude, I query pedagogical possibilities of silence and sound. In sum, this article queries possibilities in interrupting discomforts by reorienting to breathing, silence, and mantra in order to live in Bauman's liquid modernity.

Ong Namō Guru Dev Namō¹

—Gurmukhi mantra

Ong Namō Guru Dev Namō is a mantra² (sacred repeated words or script) chanted 3 times at the beginning of every Kundalini yoga class and early morning *sadhana* (dedicated spiritual practice from 4:00 AM to 6:30 AM) where I reside and do ethnographic study. *Ong Namō Guru Dev Namō* (Gurmukhi - sacred script³) is an invocation of subtle divine wisdom and the wisdom of the *guru* (teacher) within. The mantra acknowledges the wisdom and teachings that have come before us, the wisdom in the present, and the wisdom yet to come. The mantra tunes one into a lineage of teachers, teachings, and wisdom. When participants chant the mantra, they 'sound' in unison. The mantra is chanted 3 times followed by a deep inhale, moment of silent suspension of breath, and an exhale to begin Kundalini yoga and meditation.

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Some describe the mantra as a tuning fork, tuning the self into individual and collective wisdom. Others describe it as a kind of locating or a grounding, to come back to the present moment with self and others in a being-ness. This tuning fork or grounding serves as not only a comforting touchstone for the residents at the ashram, it is part of a culture and a way of life that has been preserved over 40 years. Walking into the ashram, one may remark on the quiet, not the oppressive quiet one might think of when one imagines a church, rather a welcoming, full quiet - a quiet that holds possibility and is not interrupted by sound. Also remarkably, but not surprisingly, there are no televisions, computers, and minimal use of mobile phones in the common spaces at the ashram. One may hear the conversation of residents in the kitchen, two young residents playing in the back yard, the creak of the floorboards underfoot, leaves rustling in the trees outside open windows, and the silence between the sounds. Silence at the ashram is not the antithesis of sound. In this paper, the silence referenced is not an oppressive silence, a silence that needs to be broken, or the silencing of voices and perspectives (Gershon, 2016; Miller, 2005; Olsen, 1978). Here, it is meditative silences that encompass and move with and through the sounds.

Outside of the ashram, we are colonized by the big-city soundscape of revving cars, screaming sirens, busses braking, and mobile phones chiming and vibrating – the noises of fast-paced post-modern living. Technologies, and the sounds of technologies in particular, have moved into our collective and individual spaces, without explicit invitation: Our spaces have been colonized by our buzzing, ringing, pinging devices.

The devices have taken up residency into our pockets, bags, bedrooms, and classrooms. New tech-sounds have added to the milieu of fast-paced, unpredictable living and daily our soundscapes. Sociologist and philosopher Zygmunt Bauman (1925-2017), posits living in such fast-paced, ever changing modernity, what he calls *liquid modernity*⁴, fills us with anxiety. We are fraught with pressures and tyrannized by time. He asserts society has transformed from a ‘solid’ to ‘liquid’ phase of modernity. For Bauman, we are caught in the riptide of modernity and drown in current pressures as they build up and overturn quickly. We use escapist measures and give way to addictive behaviors as a kind of salve for our dis-ease. Bauman (2005) was clear, unapologetically describing the rapid flow and unmanageability of our uncertain modern lives – life is not easy or pleasant:

Unpleasant and uncomfortable events abound: things and people keep causing worries we would not expect and certainly not wish them to cause. But what makes such discomforts particularly irksome is that they tend to come unannounced. They hit us, as we say, ‘as bolts out of the blue’; no one expects a thunderbolt from a cloudless sky, and no one can take precautions against and avert a catastrophe from that which is unexpected. The blows come suddenly, with irregularity; and their nasty ability to appear from anywhere and at any moment makes them unpredictable, and renders us defenseless. Insofar as the dangers are eminently free-floating, freakish, and frivolous, we are their sitting targets—we can do little, if anything at all, to prevent their arrival. Such hopelessness of ours is frightening. Uncertainty breeds fear. (p. 305)

How does Bauman’s modernity sound? How do the ‘bolts out of the blue’ sound? The bolts may include the mini-jolt of a cell phone buzz, a honk of a car, a man yelling at a cab driver, a jet-airliner overhead, or sonic bombs. The ‘bolts out of the blue’ can take us to our sonic brink,

as Goodman (2010) explicates the nexus of sound and fear can take us to our sonic brink; horrific, unexpected, or expected sounds may inundate populations with fear and dread.

This article explores the other end of the sonic spectrum, where sound, in particular mantra, provides support and a kind of container for the participants to dwell in while living with liquid modern uncertainties. As Gershon (2016) explains, “sound is as physical and visceral as it is liminally ephemeral. Sounds can wound and heal” (p. 83). This paper explores the sacred repeated sounds, the mantras, as a nexus of sound and calm that possibly heals or provides a salve to the barrage of sounds in liquid modern living. Here I share the experiences of participants who partake in daily sonic meditations of voiced mantra as well as the fullness of silences in the midst of modern living inherent with fear, uncertainty, and bolts of the unexpected.

In order to document how silence and sound are perceived and embodied, this article moves in 4 parts. I begin with explorations of silence, breathing, and mantra. Then I introduce to my research site and participants, which provides a brief outline of my ethnographic research with participants urban ashram in a major city in Canada. I provide excerpts from interviews with 9 meditators who regularly attend early-morning *sadhana* (daily spiritual practice from 4:00 AM to 6:30 AM). Emergent themes in the interview data include: silence, how-to sound mantras, mind chatter, and re-sounding in social spaces. The excerpts highlight the processes of silence and sound in the production of meaning for the participants’ inner as well as external lives. In the concluding section, I discuss the pedagogical possibilities of sounding, resounding, and re-sounding with self and others querying silence and sound as interruptions or salves for uncertainty, which inundate our daily lives. I take up Bauman’s (2005) charge, which leaves the discussion open for educators to navigate themselves in uncertain waters. I question the possible role of silence and re-sounding anew with deeper awareness of our voices as instruments. How might educators and their students engage differently with silence and sound? In sum, this article explores possibilities in interrupting personal discomforts by going within and reorienting to the breath, silence and emptiness within, and mantra as sonic meditation to live in Bauman’s liquid modernity.

(IM)POSSIBLE SILENCE AND BEING BREATHED

Silence is not really a doing thing. It’s a being thing I can spend a lot of time by myself quite happily in silence.

–Samuel

There never is silence.

–Jazzie

Jazzie, a resident at the ashram, is not alone in his sentiment that there is no such thing as silence. John Cage (2011), composer of *4’33”*, provoked the conception of silence when he sat at the piano with a full orchestra not playing a note. The sounds of people and the environment became the composition. Silence must have sound as “silence never ceases to imply its opposite and to depend on its presence: just as there can’t be “up” with out “down” or “left”

without “right”, so one must acknowledge a surrounding environment of sound or language in order to recognize silence” (Sontag, 1969, p. 11). Cage (2011) offers a similar comment regarding balance between sound, in particular words, and silence:

“...there are silences and the words make help make the silences” (p. 109)

People sound; our words, heartbeat, noisy pressure of the blood, and breath render silence impossible. Environments sound; as I type this article, sounds abound including the tapping of the keyboard, the hum of the overhead lights, a pencil rolls off of the table, a man clears his throat, and two women whisper between the aisles. The sign says: ‘The third floor is reserved for silent study’. Impossible. The best we can achieve is quiet space.

In the 1970s, one of my third grade school teachers offered the students in class some quiet time. She asked us to put our heads down on the desks for a five-minute quiet rest each day. I am not sure if her intent was to cultivate our inner silence or take a break for herself. What can we learn or gain from some space and time for quiet rests, which may cultivate silence? Hart (2008) posits cultivating silence may lead to subtle transformations: “Silence can invite the chattering mind to settle down and recede a bit, in turn opening awareness of more subtle currents of consciousness” (p. 242). By embracing quiet or the concept of possible silence in, around, and pervading sound, we cultivate vigilance to find and experience a new way of learning and being. This embracing of inner experience furthers what Schafer (1977) suggests as a move “toward an integrity of inner space” (p. 118). The cultivation of meditative silences leads to ‘inner space’, which invites the mind to ‘settle down’. In this way, silence is likened to a stillness within for meditators. Silence is not the void of sound but is found in and around sound, like a pregnant pause between drawn out notes on a saxophone, for example. The silences or pauses with stillness are as integral as the sound.

How might we cultivate the awareness of such full silences? How do we begin to notice the spaces between liquid modern sounds in our fast-paced living? As adults, we could begin a routine cultivating inner space by putting our head down on the desk a few times each day, say at 10:30 AM and 2:00 PM. This may not be possible for many of us. We can however, take a mini-break by quietly observing our breathing. A watch-your-breathing break can happen anywhere, on the subway, at a red light, or walking down the street. When quiet and attending to breath, notice, “nature is breathing you. You do not have to remember to breath, but when you do consciously breath, you return your awareness to nature” (Bliss, 2017, p. 116). The sound of the breath may be likened to the sound of the ocean ebbing and flowing. “Part of the sense of well-being we feel at the seashore undoubtedly has to do with the fact that the relaxed breathing pattern shows surprising correspondence with the rhythms of the breakers (Schafer, 1977, p. 227).

When we listen to the sound of the ocean or our breath, what do we learn? In Kundalini yoga, the breath is considered a teacher – *pavan guru* in Gurmukhi. The breath may teach us things about our self and our connection to nature that we may not have experienced before. It may teach us about natural balance of inhale (taking in everything that supports life) and exhale (letting go of everything that does not serve the body). We inhabit a body

that is breathed for us. We do not control this natural process, but may learn from it. At first, when we notice nature is breathing us, it may be disconcerting. The realization that we do not have control may cause immense dread or great relief. This is “a realization of the deep, earthy collectivity of things that is not of our own making, wanting, or doing” (Jardine, 2004, p. 264). The subtle sound of the breath moving through the body may not be comfortable for individuals who prefer the liquid modern currents, being swept away in incessant thoughts, television, texts, and sounds abound in the environment. Conscious meditative breathing, even for short bouts of time, encourages gaps to happen between thoughts. As we attend to the sound of the breath, we find new spaces or (non) spaces, new intersections. Hart (2004) posits the gaps in thinking offer possibilities for newness as “the cognitive gaps ... allow for the possibility of conceptual flexibility and multiplicity” (p. 34). Cognitive gaps may be what my third grade school teacher was going for when she asked us to put our heads down on the desk each day, or she wanted a break from our noisy chatter. From Hart’s (2004) assertion, the cognitive gaps may be generative for students. What possibilities might these gaps hold for knowledge and creativity? What happens when the gaps begin to widen?

Participants in this study offer their cognitive-gap experiences as a means to hearing a meditative silence. Beyond listening to the breath, participants’ commentary of experiencing silence and mantra elucidates possibilities in becoming conceptually flexible, welcoming multiplicity, and experiencing or hearing elusive silence. Schafer (1977) asserts hearing silence is possible:

Can silence be heard? Yes, if we could extend our consciousness outward to the universe and to eternity, we could hear silence. Through the practice of contemplation, little by little, the muscles and the mind relax and the whole body opens out to become an ear. When the Indian yogi attains a state of liberation for the sense, he hears the *anahata*, the “unstruck” sound. Then perfection is achieved. The secret hieroglyph of the Universe is revealed. (p. 262)

A deep listening to the sound of the breath and the silences in between may feel like a vulnerable space to observe and inhabit, as if this space would open up the vast unknown. This exposure and vulnerability may be felt or experienced with a conceptual ‘knowledge’ or as embodied educational system (Gershon, 2011; Jardine, 2004; Pinar & Irwin, 2005). Studying such meaning systems with silence and mantra allows for what Feld (2000) calls a union of acoustics and epistemology in order to “investigate the primacy of sound as a modality of knowing and being in the world” (p. 184). In this article, we hear what mantra means for the participants; they have graciously offered their personal inner experiences in semi-structured interviews. In their commentary, we hear their external, social life is also guided by their inner experiences with silence and sound. Gershon (2011) explains the interactivity of sound in the social realm: “[Sounds] are also important because such meaning system have lead to a reconceptualization of how people interact with one another and their environment as well as a reconsideration of the ideas and ideals that contextualize those interactions” (p. 68). Participants’ commentary reveals how their social interactions manifest after a daily practice of silence and mantra is cultivated.

MANTRA

Our music foretells our future. Let us lend it an ear.

–Jacques Attali, *Noise: Political Economy of Music* (1985)

Listening to the music on the radio, we may realize our troubles. Social theorist Attali (1985) queries whether we could “hear the crisis of society in the crisis of music?” (p. 11). For the participants’ responses in this study, mantra serves as a salve for the crises of daily living. Once vibrated in a regular practice, the mantras remain with participants throughout their days, emerge unexpectedly, and act as a replacement for other external and internal sounds. For participants, mantra replaces the noisy and constant computations of the mind. Mantra also interrupts the sound-colonization of our spaces, full of technological buzzes and whirs. Participants find respite in their mantras. During their days, some participants consciously choose to focus on the mantras and some participants comment the mantras are a new unconscious pattern, which are agents to replace other sounds. Participant Nicola remarks “[mantras] pop into my life at the grocery store. It’s somehow automatically playing in my mind When it happened the first time, Oh, I’ve just been chanting and didn’t notice it!” It could be argued that the mantra practice has re-colonized or re-wired Nicola, replacing her mind chatter with the soothing sounds of sacred script (Gurmukhi mantra).

In a way, the future of each day is foretold for participants in the early morning hours of *sadhana* at the ashram. Participant Jacob surmises succinctly: “It sets the tempo for the day”. For Attali (2001), this may be perceived as *composition* for the meditator, where she consumes the tempo or vibrations⁵ from the mantra and then produces them throughout her day. Attali’s (2001) composition is conceptualized as “done first and foremost for ourselves It lies primarily outside of communication” (p. 73). Attali’s sentiment is in keeping with Hart’s (2005) assertion that educators must start with themselves when considering contemplative practices and begin by developing an *inner-technology*.

In Kundalini yoga as well as Buddhist traditions, one aspect of inner-technology consists of meditation with the repeating and voicing of mantras. Mantras are considered to be essential for the internal journey of self-knowledge. The more well-known Sanskrit mantra of *Om*⁶ has been studied⁷ autoethnographically (Prattis, 2002) and historically (Moore Gerety, 2015). Prattis (2002) notes mantra’s purpose to calm the incessant chatter of the mind with vibration, “to cut through the distractions of thought and bring your attention back to sitting quietly in meditation. In this way the mantra is said to protect the mind from the mind” (p. 81). The result of the vibrations is stillness of the mind. In order to get to full stillness, or a sense of possibility of meditative silence, participants use the sound of Gurmukhi⁸ mantra during *sadhana* at an urban ashram.

GOING FURTHER INTO MANTRA: RESEARCH SITE AND PARTICIPANTS

I live at an ashram, which was founded by a Sikh yogi, Harbhajan Singh Khalsa or Yogi Bhajan, who brought Kundalini yoga to North America. The ashram was established in 1976

and at its inception housed Sikhs and Kundalini yogis until the early 1990s when residents dispersed to rural areas to buy their own homes and start families. There were no longer enough Sikhs and yogis to fill the 14 rooms. Currently, the main practices remain in the Kundalini yoga and Sikh traditions even though the residents are multi-faith and multi-practice including: 1 Sikh, 3 Kundalini yogis with no other faith affiliation, 1 Kundalini yogi who was born Catholic and currently follows Sikhism, 2 Jewish people who are Kundalini yogis, and 1 Ashtanga yogi, 1 Buddhist, 1 Sufi, 1 Amma devotee, 2 Sri Chinmoy devotees, two girls, age 8 and 10, and a 3-month old baby. I am one of the Kundalini yogis with no other faith affiliation. I teach yoga at a nearby studio and lead the early morning *sadhana* once a week at the ashram. The 9 participants in the ethnographic study, some of whom live outside of the ashram, come from varying backgrounds, socio-economic status, and age (refer to Table 1).

From the outset of this project, I was granted an *emic* (insider) perspective. I confess that I enjoy what Van Maanen (2010) calls the mess, mystery, and miracle of ethnography. Doing ethnography includes plenty of observational data, self-reflexivity, and interconnectivity with the community. These things get messy. The uncertainty and unpredictability of researching a place in community remains an uncontrollable mystery, which shifts on a daily basis. And, it is a miracle that my participants and residents of the ashram welcome me to do ethnographic research – for this I am grateful.

A year ago, I began the early morning *sadhana* from 4:00 AM to 6:30 AM. The *sadhana* practice includes a 20-minute Sikh prayer, 40 to 60 minutes of yoga, and 62 minutes of mantra. The ashram is an old house on a pretty tree-lined street. The *sadhana* room is on the third

TABLE 1
Demographics of Participants in the Study

<i>Age and Gender</i>	<i>Birthplace</i>	<i>Living at Ashram</i>	<i>Occupation</i>	<i>Experience with mantra practice?</i>	<i>Religious affiliation</i>
31 Female	San Jose, Costa Rica	Yes	Registered Massage Therapist	3 months	none
32 Female	Vancouver, BC, Canada	Yes	Yoga Teacher, Pre-school Teacher	4 years	Judaism
37 Male	Sioux Saint Marie, Ontario, Canada	Yes	Sales in Family Business	4 years	none
43 Male	Bridgewater, Connecticut, USA	No	Mantra Artist, Singer / Songwriter	21 years	Sikhism
47 Female	Caratinga, Brazil	Yes	Customer Representative for a Travel Company	10 years	Born Catholic, follow Sikhism as well
63 Male	Glasgow, Scotland	No	Retired Yoga Teacher	40 years	Sikhism
65 Male	Toronto, Ontario, Canada	Part time	Manager for the Ontario Government	5 years	Judaism
67 Male	Middleton, Ontario, Canada	Yes	Retired, Owned Retail Business	38 years	Sikhism
69 Female	Saint Peters Bay, PEI, Canada	No	Business Owner, Yoga Teacher, Grandmother	44 years	Sikhism

floor, has sea-foam green wall-to-wall carpeting, cream-colored blankets, and multi-colored cushions for meditators to use. The ceilings are sloped with 3 skylights and eight globe-like light fixtures hang in a circle. Natural light streams in at sunrise. There is very little street noise in the early morning. It is a quiet space and stillness is in the air. For 42 years, the room has only been used for yoga, meditation, and as a Sikh *Gurdwara* (prayer space). The ashram and the *sadhana* room are the sites of what Schafer (1977) terms *The Acoustic Community* where “community can be defined in many ways: as a political, geographical, religious or social entity The house can be appreciated as an acoustic phenomenon, designed for the first community, the family” (p. 215). Living in the ashram is akin to being in a family, an acoustic family, where the bond is the silence that exists all around the sounds as well as the wisdom and guidance invoked by Gurmukhi mantra. The feeling of the *sadhana* room can be considered familial *habitus* as well; meditators from outside the ashram are welcomed and there is what Bourdieu (1994) refers to as *doxa* (unwritten rules) to observe and follow, such as preferably no talking before and during *sadhana* and wearing of modest clothing.

This study focuses on the final hour of *sadhana*, which includes chanting a total of 7 mantras⁹ for 62 minutes. On any given day, the physical ease of being in the *sadhana* room at the ashram at 4:00 AM varies. Some participants sit cross-legged for the entire 62 minutes without stretching out their legs, except when in *Vir Asana* (seated warrior pose) for the 22-minute chant, some participants are fidgety and stretch their limbs throughout the practice, some lay down and fall asleep, and 2 participants regularly bring their 3-month old infant who tends to sleep during the mantras. Each morning of the week, there is a different designated leader to lead participants through the practice. The leader leads rather than teaches. Leading is more appropriate as the participants follow the yoga and mantras, without extra instruction or encouragement. Superfluous talk and words are eliminated.

During *sadhana*, cultivating quiet and allowing for silences is a key *doxa* in order to maintain a space for meditators to have their experience without much external interruption. After the chanting stops, there is a brief moment of silence, a closing song, and *Sat Nam*¹⁰ is chanted 3 times to mark the final closing of the morning practice. Once *sadhana* is complete, participants have quiet moments to stretch their bodies, fold blankets to put back on the *sadhana* room shelves, slowly gather their things to leave the *sadhana* room. Some days the silent, still moments at the end linger and other days they these moments seem elusive and disappear with conversational banter. Or, perhaps the silence and stillness remain with the banter and is ‘there all along’. Goldsaito (2016) in her picturebook *The Sound of Silence* illuminates a story of a boy searching everywhere in Tokyo, Japan for silence. One day, sitting at his desk at school, he realizes:

Everything felt still inside him.

Peaceful, like the garden after it snowed.

Like feather-stuffed futons drying in the sun.

Silence had been there all along. (p. 27)

(Not) Silent in the *Sadhana* Room

The first emergent theme from interview data is silence, which must be cultivated. “The natural world that cultural beings inhabit is one of sound. Noise is natural. It is silence that must be created. ... The cessation of sound, the stopping of speech, the choice of silence is always noteworthy” (Peek, 2000, p. 32). The following section provides an exploration of the meaning of silence for the participants. Gayle remarks, “it’s important to have silence in the mornings. Stay in silence, stay still. Stay in that space after *sadhana*, not chit chat or talk about what’s going on during the day.” Shelleanne concurs, “no chatting about the weather—no!” For the most part, the *doxa* of quiet is upheld, with exceptions of novice meditators who want more explicit instructions or who have not yet realized and integrated the *doxa*. When uninterrupted, participants remark on a “sweetness” of allowing the silence and stillness of the *Amrit Vela*¹¹ (‘ambrosial period’ between 3 AM and 6 AM) to pervade the space:

It’s blissful... . And when you’re meditating at that time in the morning, it’s just so quiet. The dogs aren’t barking or anything, the radio’s not on, and it’s just really, really quiet. *Amrit Vela* – you get that sweetness, that nectar.

–Samuel

The quiet space of the *sadhana* room allows for a cultivation of silence, which is paradoxically full and linked with sound, and particular to this context, silence is linked with mantras:

The silences between mantras and the silence at the end is – they are very special – very full, very pregnant, pregnant pause. That silence is anything but silence; it’s got lots to it. The silence is rich, full. When you are nothing, you are everything¹².

–Jazzie

[Silence] is a feeling. The experience of silence as a feeling means that it’s very full. It’s not an empty feeling at all. With mantra, when you are tuning into certain vibrations, it just changes the quality of that silence... . Silence is like, I guess it’s a relief – coming to an oasis. That kind of feeling. You get to recharge. You feel replenished and then you go back out into the world.

–Miriam

The space between mantras and after *sadhana*, it stops and you just have that silent moment. I feel like the mantra makes the silence more powerful. Right after a mantra has ended and that silence you sit in, ahh, this feels so good... . Having a mantra, the sound and the silence. One can’t be without the other – they come together which is cool and complicated.

–Nicola

For participants, mantra serves as a gateway to an experience of silence. Feeling “relief” and “an oasis” then going “back into the world” serves the participants well as a tool to navigate the waters of liquid modernity.

Ways of ‘Sounding’: Thoughts on ‘How to’ Do Mantras and Everyday Speech

The second theme that emerged from the interviews was how to do or sound the mantras. There is a link between the participants’ ‘sounding correctly’ in the *sadhana* room, with the mantras, and in real life after their *sadhana* for the day is complete. The ‘how’ we resound in daily life is of note, but not often broached. Participant Nicola comments our voice and words are an instrument and “using this instrument we have is important”. If your voice is an instrument, what would it be and how would you play it? What notes are you hitting with regular speech or what is your resonance with self, colleagues, and students? How we ‘sound’ each day is different. If educators and students have an awareness of how we sound in regular speech as the participants are aware of the mantras, our voice and word choices may be greatly altered. This requires an awareness and mindfulness of how we produce sounds and what our intention is with our words and voices as instruments.

This concept is illuminated by the participants commenting on many ways to ‘sound’ during *sadhana* and what sounds are palatable versus disruptive. Participants may whisper the mantras, chant loudly and with vigour, listen, or sleep. Traditionally and the early days at the ashram, *sadhana* was accompanied by live music. Meditators would play the harmonium and *tabla* (Indian drum) to add a musical element to the mantras. The musicians in the ashram have since moved away and now the usual musical accompaniment is a recording on a CD or device. The background music of the recordings varies from traditional Indian raga to having an easy listening or popular-music influence. Each *sadhana* leader chooses the recording, so a meditator may experience 7 differing variations for the mantras over a week. For participants who have experienced traditional chanting, the musicality of many of the CDs chosen by the leaders is a meditative interruption:

When I’m doing *sadhana* now, if it’s sing songy, if the sound goes beyond what it requires to make that connection with the tongue and the mouth and the lips, then I usually just cut it off. I don’t do the long extended sounds. I just make the sound and cut it off and try to work CDs of the chanting to find out where they are breathing because there is no sound on the tape indicating any kind of breath or no obvious break for breath... . [In the past], there was much more a focus on how you would do it; in other words, getting the sounds right. If you do it right, if you do it correctly, if you hit the right spot with the tip of your tongue, you’ll get a resonance in your frontal lobe or a sense of a resonance.

–Steve

In the community of the ashram, Steve is a man of fewer words. When he speaks, others listen because few of his words are superfluous. He listens more than he speaks. It is as if he is being efficient with his words and precise, like he suggests the mantras be. He ‘cuts off’ his own words that are unnecessary. His tone, meter, and rhythm is deliberate in his everyday speech. There are no fillers and superfluous chatter. The Gurmukhi chants on CDs have differing tone, meter, and rhythm. Participants are opinionated in what works for them in terms of ‘sounding’ the mantras. In order to get a resonance or vibration in the frontal lobe, the

Gurmukhi sounds, syllables must be voiced correctly, not sung; rather chanted or said with precision. Chanting is different than singing or a musical production:

I don't like the singing stuff. Monotone is more powerful because it's the meter of mantra. It's not singing, it's chanting. You don't see Buddhist monks singing.

–Samuel

... bands chanting, they want to be fashionable with their own way. For me, they lose the way of the mantra. Instead of keeping it simple, they change it and make it their own. This is distracting.

–Shelleanne

There is a monotone repetition to traditional chanting of mantras. It is tonal and metered for a purpose – to calm the constant computation of the mind and allow for a meditative experience. Sometimes, if the music is sung and not chanted, the mantras can be emotional. Miriam comments the music on the CDs is suitable for beginning meditators, as music is an initial, emotional draw:

The way that [mantras] are done, the singing and so forth, I think it's good for people coming into the practice and they need a way to hook in and to feel uplifted in an immediate sense, right, because music is very emotional.

–Miriam

The music can be pleasant or a distraction. Similarly, in liquid modernity, external sounds may be palatable or a bother. For example, what is your reaction to the ring of a mobile phone or an ambulance siren? The sound of the physics teacher's voice and words may grate on the nerves of one student and be pleasant for another. How we sound externally is as important as how we sound internally, with the voice in our head, our mind chatter.

Mind Chatter Replaced by Mantra

Participants reveal how mantra replaces or soothes internal sounds of the mind – the thoughts. For meditators, an awareness of the mind chatter becomes more heightened with practice. Participants remark on how the internal chatter gets noticed, checked, and replaced by the mantras during their regular day after 6:30 AM has well passed:

[Thinking] used to be my day all day long, start to finish thinking, and that has gone away a lot. I used to think a hundred things at a time, now I'm thinking one or two. Just by having this [mantra] part of my life, I keep getting better that way.

–Jacob

If I've got a bunch of things going on, it doesn't occur to me and every once in a while, I think, I should pay attention to this and then thirty-nine seconds later I've lost it again and a minute later I think, oh, I was going to do that and then I'll start it [mantra] again... . That's what happens when you do it on a regular basis. I find myself chanting them during the day, not verbally, but just internally.

–Samuel

I can get on the streetcar. I can make my way to the office. I can do other things but the mantra can be playing inside of my head and I'm consciously playing it. It just enables me not to get to hassled, not to worry about what's coming up next. It gives my mind something to do so I'm not doing the monkey brain chatter.

–Jazzie

[Mantra] takes you out of your every day mundane chitter chatter mind talk.

–Gayle

Possibilities in Re-Sounding: Moving from Internal to External Experiences

The mantras become a part of the participants' daily lives. Schafer (1977) explains the function of nada yoga (union with sound) or naad (the sound current) is interiorization of vibrations which remove “the individual from this world and elevates him toward higher spheres of existence. When the yogi recites [her] mantra, [she] feels the sound surge through [her] body. [Her] nose rattles... . [She] is the sphere. [She] is the universe” (Schafer, 1977, p. 119). The mantras create vibrations within the meditators, which remain with them and follow them during the day. The act of sitting in the *sadhana* room is the first consumption and production of the day – considered by some of the participants as a victory.

The final emergent theme from interview data is that of a re-sounding or recalibration of vibration. The participants start a process to set their own vibration, which allows them to meet the challenges of modern living in relation with self and others:

On a psychological level, if you *can* get up and get to *sadhana*, it is a victory.

–Gayle

[*Sadhana*] is ... the first victory of the day, you've done this work, this practice, this chanting, and now you're ready to face the day. You've tucked this in even before your working day, your normal day begins, so it's like a gift... . I do find the energy and chanting [mantra] is not just out there. It's returning and coming back to me... . There is a vibration that comes back to me that I find is strengthening. It just seems to resolve things.

–Jazzie

For me, [*sadhana*] is a metaphor for life. Continue, hold your pose, keep awake, keep doing it for a certain time. It's like when you have a challenge in your life, you say no, I give up this relationship, job, this whatever, [but instead] you just stay and do your best. These mantras, chanting helps me Instead of complaining about something, I keep going.

–Shelleanne

I'm mumbling, doing [mantra] on the subway, or wherever, it gives me stillness ... I'm a lot more focused. It helps me during the day, as well, to know what I basically want to do. It gives me energy.

–Samuel

I would say most times I do *sadhana*, one of the mantras follows me so I catch myself humming it or chanting it in my head or out loud.

–Jacob

Once the mantras remain with the participants during their day, a new social engagement outside of the *sadhana* room ensues. The participants resonate differently with others. Feld (2000) explicates the resonance in social time and space:

Soundscapes are perceived and interpreted by human actors who attend to them as a way of making their place in and through the world. Soundscapes are invested with significance by those whose bodies and lives resonate with them in socialtime and space. (p. 184)

The participants reflect on being in social spaces after a practice of mantra is established:

[Mantra] helps me to feel more confident to relate with others, to express myself... . I see how much I improved from when I started until now. I am more tolerant with people. I'm more peaceful. I'm more like watching the big picture instead of small things.

–Shelleanne

[Mantras] follow me a lot. I use mantras in different situations... . in the mall ... it gets me grounded. A mantra over and over again will get you out of that [hectic] space and calm you down now matter where you are.

–Gayle

Your body is vibrating with positive energy, then yeah, you can be calm and you can deflect the craziness of the day, you might say. You are just vibrating and you can take it in. It's very, very simple.

–Jazzie

Participants also describe the arising of a peaceful presence and a calibration to a new vibration in experienced meditators:

This person has something and you wonder well, what have they done, where have they been, what's their story. They are there. I think it really is just presence. It's noticeable."

–Steve

You create an awareness, you become neutral, your awareness expands, you become more still. If someone approaches that space, they'll either have to calm themselves, or they have to turn around. You are holding a space, so that people come in to the space feel more peace.

–Graham

Mantra evokes a vibration and repeating it a certain number of times when you repeat, you are calibrating, you are setting your vibration. So when you walk out into the world, your vibration is set. So whatever it is, you are impacting ... you are set ... that vibration is always with you. It's always working for you.

–Miriam

PEDAGOGICAL POSSIBILITIES

Using this instrument we have is important.

–Nicola

We are all full of sound emanating from us, coming to us, moving through us. LaBelle (2012) describes how we are fully enveloped in auditory relations: "Sound ... performs with and through space: it navigates geographically, reverberates acoustically, and structures socially, ... it escapes room, vibrates walls, disrupts conversation; it expands and contracts space by accumulating reverberations, relocating place beyond itself (p. 470). We cannot escape the incessant noise of the sonic universe of which we are a part. In order to find quiet space, an oasis from the tumultuous waters of liquid modernity, Hart (2008) asserts educators must begin by going within themselves:

Interiority in education is about developing spaciousness within us in order that we may meet and take in the world that is before us. The greater the information, technology, and demands from the world around us, the more essential the interiority. (p. 235)

Interiority may give us opportunity in and around the inundation of sounds. Pedagogically, cultivating silence and finding stillness within may be transformative for learning:

The more subtle benefits rooted in stillness of mind and expanded awareness are real and essential but more difficult to quantify. In the end however, it is these subtle shifts that may have the most potential for transforming the learner and the quality of learning. (Hart, 2004, p. 34)

The implications of stillness of the mind cultivated by mantra hold possibilities for educators and students. Here, it is not my intent to recommend mantra in public schooling as that would be a stretch. Through the data, it is clear however that an appreciation and exploration of full silences is generative. In this study, the mantras allow participants a new engagement and awareness with their mind chatter as well as engagement with others. The ‘how to’ sound the mantras adds a particular concept of possibility. How do we ‘sound’ in daily life? What instrument are we playing with our voices? What is at stake if we do not consider our voices as instruments and continue superfluous banter? The cultivation of interiority in order to emerge anew in continually complex social environments is paramount in our current educational environments of uncertainty. Perhaps coming to know *pavan guru* (breath as teacher), or choosing our words carefully and efficiently like participant Steve does, provides and opening to new engagement with each other. Perhaps exploring silence as fullness that participant Jazzie describes, “a full, pregnant silence”, opens new possibilities in our perceptions and interactions. Deep listening, full meditative silences, and a reconceptualization of our speech as a re-sounding mechanism have the possibility to transform our relationships. The emergent themes from the interview data in this study show that listening to the breath and experiencing elusive silence as well as a reconceptualization external movement embodied with mantra create space for renewed social engagement. How might educators engage silence, breathing, and re-sounding in a move toward a curriculum that sounds like a full silence, pregnant with possibility?

CONCLUDING WITH SILENCE

Schafer (1977) suggests, “all research into sound must conclude with silence—not the silence of a negative vacuum but the positive silence of perfection and fulfillment” (p. 262). Perhaps if we deeply listen, we may hear the perfection and fulfillment of full pregnant pauses. We may discover fullness and possibilities in silence. Silence, a phenomenon which moves through and around all uncertainties, noise, and sound in Zygmunt Bauman’s liquid modern world.

NOTES

1. *Ong Namō Guru Dev Namō* translated: *Ong Namō* – I bow to the subtle divine wisdom, *Guru Dev Namō* – I bow to the divine teacher within. See source online: <http://www.spiritvoyage.com/mantra/Ong-Namō-Guru-Dev-Namō/MAN-000019.aspx>
2. Etymology of mantra: 1808, “that part of the Vedas which contains hymns,” from Sanskrit *mantra-s* “sacred message or text, charm, spell, counsel,” literally “instrument of thought,” related to *manyate* “thinks,” from root *men* “to think.” Sense of “special word used for meditation” is first recorded in English 1956. Source: http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?allowed_in_frame=0&search=mantra
3. Punjabi is spoken language and Gurmukhi is a script, for writing Punjabi. Guru Nanak developed the Gurmukhi script in the form of ‘Gurmukhi Painiti’. Guru Angad popularized and standardized the script. Go to sources online include: www.sikhsangat.com and http://www.sikhiwiki.org/index.php/Learn_Gurmukhi

4. Bauman's liquid writings include: *Liquid Modernity* (2000), *Liquid Love: On the Frailty of Human Bonds* (2003), *Liquid Life* (2005), *Liquid Fear* (2006), *44 Letters from the Liquid Modern World* (2010), *Culture in a Liquid Modern World* (2011)
5. In this article, I draw on Schafer (1977) for the definition of vibration: "a cosmic sound giving prime unity, a concentration or gathering point from which all other sounds are perceived tangentially" (p. 99).
6. See Moore Gerety's (2005) comprehensive dissertation on *Om* in reference list. This youtube has over 5 million views: *Om Chanting at 432 Hz*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SBiwLibZqfw&t=4624s>
7. The effects of chanting *Om* have also been studied. See the following sources: 1) Bernardi, L., Sleight, P., Bandinelli, G., Cencetti, S., Fattorini, L., Wdowczyk-Szulc, J., & Lagi, A. (2001). Effect of rosary prayer and yoga mantras on autonomic cardiovascular rhythms: Comparative study. *BMJ: British Medical Journal*, 323(7327), 1446; 2) Edwards, L. (2003). Meditation as medicine. Benefits go beyond relaxation. *Advances for Nurse Practitioners*, 11(5), 49-52.
8. Reminder: these words are scripts and not a language. In Kundalini yoga, the Gurmukhi mantras are voiced meditations for durations of 3 minutes up to 2 1/2 hours.
9. The 7 mantras chanted at *sadhana* are in order as follows: 1) The Adi Shakti Mantra: Ek On Kaar Sat Naam Siri Wha-hay Guru (7 minutes); 2) Wah Yantee, Kar Yantee (7 minutes); 3) Mul Mantra (7 minutes); 4) Sat Siri, Siri Akal (7 minutes); 5) Rakhe Rakhan Har (7 minutes); 6) Wahe Guru Wahe Jio (22 minutes); 7) Guru Ram Das (5 minutes).
10. *Sat Nam* is a mantra used as a closing of Kundalini yoga and meditation classes. In the Kundalini yoga community, it is also used as a greeting like hello and goodbye. It is sometimes translated as 'true name', 'truth is my name' or 'truth identified'. See: <http://www.spiritvoyage.com/blog/index.php/sat-nam-the-kundalini-mantra-of-awareness/>
11. For more detailed information about the *Amrit Vela*: <http://www.sikhiwiki.org/index.php/Amritvela>
12. One may take issue with being 'nothing' as Jazzie describes. David Loy (2008) explains, "We don't like being nothing. A gaping hole at one's core is quite distressing" (p. 18). Loy (2008) explicates the origin of the word *shunyata* (emptiness): "The original Buddhist term usually translated as emptiness actually has this double-sided meaning. It derives from the root *shu*, which means "swollen" in both senses: not only the swollenness of a blown-up balloon but also the swollenness of an expectant woman, pregnant with possibility. So a more accurate translation of *shunyata* would be: emptiness/fullness" (p. 22). In Kundalini yoga, *shunyata* is *shuniya*, which translates as being zero or zero-ness. The space of being zero allows for all possibilities.

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