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SOUND AND YOGA

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Introduction
What is the significance of sound for understanding yoga? And yoga for sound? The answers depend on practice, practitioner and context. Imagine the range of sounds at a postural yoga studio: the teacher’s voice and footsteps; students’ breaths, grunts and sighs; bodies and yoga-wear shuffling; the handling of blocks and props; recorded chanting and music; live voices intoning the sacred syllable OM and other Sanskrit mantras; singing bowls droning; a smartphone’s muffled vibration; doors opening and closing; people murmuring outside; the distant drone of traffic. Some of these sounds are intentional and cultivated, while others are incidental and intrusive. The constant ebb and flow makes up the acoustic environment of a given practice – what we might call the ‘soundscape’ of yoga (Schafer 1993 [1977]). Yet there is more to yogic soundscapes than external, audible sound. Sound in yoga also encompasses internal, silent and embodied realms of vibration, with practitioners listening to their own breath, tuning in to inner sounds, or meditating on the flow of sonic energy within the subtle body. This chapter treats the diverse manifestations of sound and listening in yoga and meditation, focusing on the quintessential sonic instrument in these traditions: the Sanskrit mantra.

Theorising sound
The field of sound studies offers a useful frame for thinking about yoga and sound. Sound studies is a name for the interdisciplinary ferment in the human sciences that takes sound as its analytical point of departure or arrival. By analyzing both sonic practices and the discourses and institutions that describe them, it redescribes what sound does in the human world, and what humans do in the sonic world …

(Sterne 2012: 2; cf. Pinch and Bijsterveld 2012)

A central concern is to understand the ways sound and listening have formed auditory culture – the aural analogue of visual culture. In this vein, Bull and Back advocate a stance of ‘deep listening’, which involves ‘attuning our ears to listen again to the multiple layers of meaning potentially embedded in the same sound’ (2003: 4) in order to ‘rethink’ relations of community, place and power. In approaching auditory culture, the relations between sounds are also important: hence, Sterne’s imperative ‘to think across sounds, to consider sonic phenomena in relationship to one another’ (2012: 3). The domains of sound and listening resonate with particular force in sacred
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contexts; indeed, as Kapchan has observed, ‘listening to sound creates sacred affect and identity’ (2004: 70). Against this stance that our understanding of sound is always mediated by human culture, other scholars have theorised sound as a universal phenomenon with its own materiality and ontology that can only be revealed through sound itself. For Goodman, ‘the sonic is a phenomenon of contact’ (Goodman 2009: 10, cited in Kane 2015: 5) – vibration transmitted materially from one body to another. According to Cox, sound art, because it eschews representation and brings attention to sound as such, ‘broadens the domain of the audible and discloses a genuine metaphysics of sound’ (Cox 2009: 25, cited in Kane 2015: 8). In a recent critique of this ‘ontological turn’, Kane argues that such claims to universalism can never be severed entirely from their cultural context: ‘a “sound studies” without “auditory culture”… crucially ignores the constitutive role that auditory culture plays in determining its object of study’ (Kane 2015: 16). Echoing Kane’s critique, this chapter contends that the histories of sound, listening and yoga in India – rich veins of auditory culture stretching back thousands of years – ultimately serve to constitute the theories of yogic sound ascendant in any given context. Yogic sound, notwithstanding its claims of transcendence, can never entirely transcend the cultures that reveal it.

Sound studies has pushed back against ‘the assumed supremacy of the “visual” in accounts of the social’ (Bull and Back 2003: 3) by asserting ‘the primacy of sound as a modality of knowing and being in the world’ (Feld 2003: 226). The emergence of sound studies on the academic scene – quite recent, when compared with visual culture studies and sensory studies – leads James Lavender to articulate the goal of sound studies with equal parts urgency and succinctness: ‘to make sound thinkable, at last’ (Lavender 2017: 246). This is a common sentiment in sound studies: that somehow or other, the academy has neglected the sonic and the aural. For Sterne, the most damning evidence is on the tips of our tongues: ‘While visual experience has a well-developed metalanguage, sonic experience does not … [T]here are very few abstract words in common English for describing the timbre, rhythm, texture, density, amplitude, or spatiality of sounds’ (Sterne 2014: 60). Lavender goes further still, suggesting that critical theory to date has been inadequate to the task of thinking sonically. Thus, sound ‘is not merely another object for thought … rather, it is a demand posed to thought by that which it has yet been unable to think’ (Lavender 2017: 246).

In the face of these debates over sound’s universality, cultural embeddedness and even imperiousness to thought and expression, yoga studies has something to offer. Indian religions, which furnish the context for the earliest constructions of yoga, have a long and highly developed history of ‘thinking sound’. This history includes refined metalanguages and sophisticated traditions of critical and philosophical reflection. It also includes ancient sonic ontologies and theologies, elaborate practices of sounding and listening and dynamic auditory cultures. So even as we consider the potential for recent academic scholarship about sound to illuminate yoga, we must also do the reverse: draw on Indian accounts of yoga to illuminate sound.4

Yoga as a technique of listening

Sound studies and yoga studies alike are concerned with ‘techniques of listening’ (Sterne 2014). Calling the body ‘man’s first and most natural instrument’, Mauss made the case that human activity is based on ‘techniques of the body’ – repertoires of actions imparted through training and socialisation (Mauss 1935; 2006) (see Ciolkosz, Chapter 33 in this volume). Such techniques run the gamut from habitual, apparently natural activities such as walking, sleeping and sex to more obviously self-conscious, culturally constructed ones like dancing, swimming and writing. Arguing that listening is likewise a bodily technique, Sterne charts a genealogy of
techniques of listening in modernity, with an emphasis on technology. Sterne’s main interest is ‘headset culture’, which he defines as the separation of listening from other sensory techniques in order to intensify audition; the examination of sound on its own terms, through analysis of acoustic content; and the technological transformation of acoustic space from a collective ambience to an individualised cocoon. The pervasiveness of headset culture should be obvious to anyone who moves through cosmopolitan space in the world today, be it a shopping mall, train station or apartment: earpieces, smartphones and headsets sequester individuals within invisible walls, immersing them in interior soundscapes, permitting them to be ‘alone together’ (Sterne 2014: 69).

Indian traditions of yoga and meditation possess many highly cultivated techniques of the body, as Mauss himself – a trained Indologist and close reader of yoga texts in Sanskrit – observed (Mauss 1935; Noland 2009: 35–37). Alongside techniques of posture and breath, yoga possesses elaborate techniques of sounding, most notably the recitation of mantras in various registers. What may be less apparent, however, is that some of yoga’s most powerful bodily techniques are techniques of listening. Such techniques need not be centred on the ears, just as techniques of sounding mantras need not be centred on the voice. Yogic sound may be entirely embodied and interiorised – and still be sound. Where an ordinary person might hear silence, the practitioner of yoga perceives a continuum of vibration that extends from gross to subtle, connecting the outside phenomenal world with the innermost recesses of the body – what the Chāndogya Upaniṣad calls the ‘space within the heart’ (8.1.3; trans. after Olivelle 1998).

Drawing on the auditory culture school of sound studies, let me suggest that yogic sound is above all a domain of deep listening. The practitioner voices a mantra out loud – or silently chants it – then listens carefully to every phase of its emanation, resonance and decay. In this way, mantras originating within the body become sonic instruments for entering into contemplative states and revealing esoteric layers of meaning. Other bodily techniques can deepen listening further, as the Maitrāyaniya Upaniṣad attests: ‘By fixing (yoga) the thumbs on the ears, practitioners listen to the sound in the space within the heart’ (6.22; trans. after van Buitenen 1962). Modern postural yoga has its own techniques of deep listening: practitioners are often enjoined to ‘listen’ to their bodies and emotions, attending to areas of flexibility, injury, stress and so on. Sustained listening in this way allows yoga practitioners in a group to be alone together in a way that resembles headset culture. With the body as their primary instrument – and usually without any external apparatus such as headsets – practitioners of yoga have cultivated their own interior soundscapes for centuries. Yoga offers an auditory path to aesthetic states of aloneness, whether it is the radical ‘isolation’ (kaivalya) of Pātañjala yoga or everyday contemplation on a yoga mat.

**Sound, listening and yoga in India: entangled histories**

Sound and listening have been central to yoga throughout its history. The rest of this chapter surveys the entangled histories of sound, listening and yoga from the earliest Indian texts up through the transnational movements of today, with the goal of articulating an overarching theory of yogic sound. This diachronic approach comes with limits and risks. We should abandon any hope of being comprehensive. Like all human culture, yogic sound is a domain of tradition and innovation, shaped equally by the authority of earlier models and by adaptations to new doctrines, media and social facts. To the extent that an all-encompassing theory of yoga and sound is possible, it can only be formulated by taking stock of this dynamic interplay over the longue durée. What is the significance of sound for yoga, yoga for sound? We now take up the practitioners and practices, texts and contexts that will help us answer these questions.
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Vedic sacred sound

Indian discourses of sacred sound begin with the Védas, a corpus of mantras and texts composed without the aid of writing in the late second and early first millennium BCE – and orally passed on ever since within lineages of Brahmin priests (Jamison and Witzel 2003). The agency of Brahmins in the construction of yogic sound can hardly be overstated: most sonic traditions of yoga bear the imprint of Brahmanical ideologies and practices. Although the Védas were eventually written down and have had a parallel existence in manuscripts and books for the last thousand years, the efficacy and authority of Vedic mantras depend on sound. Already in the ancient period, practitioners described the Védas as ‘that which is heard’ (śruti), thereby casting orthodox religiosity as listening to the echoes of an eternal auditory revelation. As the seminal work of Padoux (1990) has demonstrated for Vedic and Hindu Tantric traditions, sacred sound – manifesting as the ‘goddess Speech’ (vāc) – inspires a range of cosmologies, theologies and soteriologies based on phonemes, words and language. This intertwining of sound, language and metaphysics is not limited to vāc alone – van Buitenen points out that Indian religion and philosophy furnish numerous examples of single terms that denote spoken utterances while simultaneously representing transcendent principles. Brahmā – at once a ‘sacred formulation’ and a name for absolute reality (Thieme 1952) – is a signal instance. Another is aksara, a polyvalent term that denotes both a grammatical ‘syllable’ and the great syllable that Vedic poets regard as the inexhaustible source of sound, speech and the cosmos (van Buitenen 1959).

Sound, sacrifice, solar ascent

Vedic sacrifice, the premier ritual system of ancient India, was crucial for the development of early ideas about sound and mantra. Sound is fundamental to the soteriological efficacy of sacrifice: the recitation of mantras helps the patron to attain immortality. The types of mantra include ‘verse’ (ṛc), ‘melody’ (sāman) and ‘formula’ (yajus) – such is the three-fold knowledge that comprises the sacrificial portions of the Vedic corpus: Rgveda, Sāmaveda and Yajurveda (Caland and Henry 1907). For the most part, Vedic mantras are verbal praise directed to the gods in heaven. In this respect, the gods are the main audience for ritual performance: the sound of the mantras attracts their attention to the feast of offerings. Beyond this sacrificial milieu, later Hindu Tantric and yogic traditions venerate certain Vedic mantras for their auspiciousness and power: the signal example is the sāvitrī mantra (Rgveda 3.62.10; also dubbed the gāyatrī because it is a verse in the gāyatrī metre), which celebrates the inspiration of the sun–god.

Vedic authors conceive the pursuit of immortality as an ascent to the sun that carries practitioners across the three worlds of earth, atmosphere and heaven. This paradigm is another way that Vedic traditions shape yoga – David White calls solar ascent the ‘episteme of Indic soteriologies’ (White 2009: 60). The vertical trajectory may be encoded in sonic terms. For instance, a common expiatory formula articulates ascent by arraying the terms ‘earth, atmosphere, heaven’ (bhūr bhuvaḥ svan) in a sonic sequence. Another example is the structure of the Vedic liturgies themselves: on the last day of sacrifice, the number of syllables in the mantras and their respective metres increases with successive rounds, thereby constructing a liturgical ascent that climaxes in the final rounds of chanting (Gerety 2015: 252n8). Yet the most fundamental expression of ascent through sound is the sacred syllable OM, whose utterance leads to ‘the heavenly world’ (Aitareya Brāhmaṇa 5.32; see Gerety 2015: 156). As the Chāndogya Upaniṣad says of a dying man: ‘But when he is departing from this body, he rises up along those same solar rays. He goes up with om. No sooner does he cast his mind towards it than he reaches the sun’ (8.6, trans. after Olivelle 1998).
The sacred syllable OM

OM emerges in Vedic texts as a multifarious recitational technique: variants of the syllable are added to other mantras to augment their efficacy in performance. These variants run the gamut from the pure o-sound to the nasalised om/ oň to the labial om; sometimes, the o is held out for three or more beats, noted as o3m.6 In the ‘humming’ (praṇava), the most frequent of OM’s many uses in sacrifice, the ‘om-sound’ (omkāra) is substituted as a resonant flourish for the final syllable of a Rgvedic mantra.7 Whether in the praṇava or in some other application, the practice of adding variants of OM to mantra recitation is so frequent that the syllable comes to characterise the acoustic environment of Vedic ritual performance: hence, the Upaniṣadic statement of cosmic holism – ‘this whole world is OM’ (Tāttvādya Upaniṣad 1.8; trans. after Olivelle 1998) – can also be read as a description of the soundscape of sacrifice, where OM is heard to ring out constantly. By the middle of the first millennium BCE, OM symbolises the essence of the Vedic corpus: millions of syllables articulated in a single, elemental sound.

Although some scholars have argued that the primary meaning of OM is ‘yes’ (Parpola 1981), OM as a symbol represents the potency of sound prior to and beyond language; like brahman, the syllable is constitutive of language but never constrained by it. The way that OM is vocalised emphasises its elemental nature. As Staal reminds us: ‘the most natural order of sound production is an opening of the mouth followed by its closure’ – and this, in turn, is ‘a very apt description of the mantra om’ (Staal 1989: 274–275; see also Jakobson 1962: 541 and Gerety 2016: 186–187). Already by 800 BCE, Vedic authors had analysed the sequence of constituent phonemes that make up OM’s articulation, explaining the syllable as the euphonic combination of the phonemes a, u and m (Aitareya Brāhmaṇa 5.32; Gerety 2015: 156). The practitioner opens the mouth, and the breath engages with a slight catch in the throat as the vocal cords begin to resonate (a). The sound wells up and moves across the tongue into the roof of the mouth (u), lingering with a tickle below the nose and finishing with the resonant closure of the lips (m). There is momentum from breath to voice, inside to outside, silence to sound, opening to closure. The analysis of OM’s phonemes proves to be a fertile theme in the construction of yogic sound. The locus classicus of a-u-m reflections is the Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad, where the three phonemes correspond to the three Vedas, the three worlds, the three states of consciousness, the past, present and future, and so on. The authors of this work supersede these triads by adding what Wendy Doniger calls a ‘transcendent fourth’ (2014: 27, 29–31) – silence. The fame of the a-u-m analysis is such that many scholars and practitioners hold that ‘aum’ is the original form of the sacred syllable. Yet the reverse is true: aum is derived from ancient phonemic analysis of OM.

Vedic mantras: between sound and silence

As a counterpoint to audible sound, silence is woven throughout Vedic soundscapes. The interplay between sound and silence is encoded in the very term mantra, which derives from the Sanskrit root ‘to think’ (man-), and is cognate with Indo-European words for the faculty of thought, from Sanskrit manas to Latin mens to English mind. Although mantras frequently entail chanting, murmuring and other forms of audible sound, this etymology shows that they are also ‘instruments of thought’ (Thieme 1957). The Vedic expression ‘yoked to the mind’ (manoyukta) describes how a priest mentally engages with mantra (White 2009: 60–63). Whether or not it is recited out loud, a mantra in Vedic traditions always presupposes the silent activity of the mind; this idea is only strengthened in traditions of yoga.

While most recitations in sacrifice must be ‘loud’ (uccaiḥ) and ‘distinct’ (niruktā), other vocal registers are also important. Total silence is sometimes called for: the brahman priest, who flags
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In later Vedic texts, authors elevate quiet, internal forms of recitation over the loud and external. This sonic predilection corresponds to the broader ‘inward turn’ (White 2009: 76) of Vedic religiosity in the middle of the first millennium BCE, when ritualists experimented with the interiorisation of ritual and its components – including mantra. Malamoud’s study of the daily practice of ‘personal recitation’ (svādhyāya; Malamoud 1977), which consists of orally reviewing Vedic texts for mastery, offers insights into this development and suggests another paradigm for yogic mantra meditation. According to a key early passage on svādhyāya analysed by Malamoud (Tāttvārāṇyaka 2.3–8), after sunrise the practitioner leaves his village and seeks out a secluded place where the rooftops are no longer visible. There, he sits down facing east on strewn grass with his legs crossed, right foot propped on the left knee. Holding a ring made of two blades of grass, he positions his hands so that the right rests on top of the left. To complete the posture, he fixes his gaze on the horizon where the sky meets the earth (or else closes his eyes). He then performs the svādhyāya proper by murmuring the syllable om followed by other mantras. This is the origin of the practice of beginning Vedic instruction with OM (see, e.g. Mānava Dharmaśāstrā 2.74–75). (Remarkably, this longstanding convention is still evident in modern settings: recitations in Hindu temples today begin with OM – as do many yoga classes.) In contrast with external sacrifices, which involve loud mantras and material offerings to the gods, svādhyāya is considered a ‘sacrifice to the absolute’ (brahmaṇya) – the quiet offering of mantras for the practitioner’s liberation.

Because svādhyāya is conducted in a murmur, Vedic authors also refer to it as the ‘sacrifice of japa’ (japayajña). The authors of the Mahābhārata, the Sanskrit epic, emphasise japa’s interiority and efficacy for attaining liberation. By undertaking japa, meditating on the absolute and devoting himself to a supreme deity, the japa practitioner (jāpaka) can achieve release as surely as the yoga practitioner (yogin) (Mahābhārata 12.193). The contrast between the two pursuits in the epic is striking, perhaps anticipating the decreased importance of mantra in some later streams of yoga, as Mallinson and Singleton have argued (Mallinson and Singleton 2017: 258, 262). Brockington (2012) suggests that japa in the epic offers a bridge between Vedic practices and the devotional practice of murmuring the name of God repeatedly. In the Bhagavad Gītā, Kṛṣṇa seems to allude to such a practice when he announces ‘of all the sacrifices, I am the sacrifice consisting of japa’ (7.8). Yoga in the Gītā, which encompasses a range of practices from asceticism to devotional worship, makes mantra-muttering a central feature of its soteriological
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reertoire. In one striking passage, Krṣṇa counsels Arjuna to combine ‘devotion’ (bhakti), ‘yoga-power’ (yogabala) and OM into a contemplative praxis that ensures liberation at the moment of death (Bhagavad Gītā 8.12–13):

Shutting all the gates of his body and confining his mind in his heart; keeping his breath in his head, absorbed in concentration through yoga; uttering om — brahman in a single syllable — and calling me to mind; when he sets forth, leaving his body — such a man goes along the highest path.

In Upaniṣads composed before the early centuries CE, we can trace the emergence of a system of mantra meditation that involves OM, yoga and contemplative techniques such as ‘meditation’ (dhyāna) or ‘fixation’ (dhiṇa). Showing that sonic practices are contemplative practices (and vice versa), these Upaniṣads employ sound to soteriological ends. For instance, the Kaṭha Upaniṣad, an influential work that contains an early definition of yoga, teaches that OM is the best ‘support’ (ālambana; 2.17) for meditating on the self and transcending death. In the Mirdaka Upaniṣad (2.2.3), OM is the bow that propels the arrow of the self into the target of the absolute, so that the practitioner becomes immersed in brahman. The Praśna Upaniṣad recommends ‘meditating’ (abhi + ṣṭhāya; 5.1) on the syllable OM at death. The liminality of sound — the way it crosses the physical boundaries of the practitioner’s body — is a key factor in these discourses about transitions to metaphysical states. Thus, the Śvetāvatara Upaniṣad codifies ‘the discipline of meditation’ (dhyānayoga) by teaching how to ‘grasp both God and primal matter within the body by means of the praṇava’ (1.13; trans. after Olivelle 1998), a technique that is compared to igniting a fire.

**Sound and mantra in early yoga: the Pāṭaṅjalayogaśāstra**

Let us turn now to the Pāṭaṅjalayogaśāstra, the influential system of yoga articulated in terse sūtras and an accompanying auto-commentary, all likely composed in the third to fourth centuries CE (Maas 2006). Although this work is known primarily for its codification of yoga as silent meditation, it also incorporates mantra-based practices. The Vedic influence is evident: Pāṭaṅjali’s list of ‘observances’ (niyama) includes svādhyāya (2.44; see Carpenter 2003: 29–34): ‘From personal recitation arises union with one’s chosen deity’ (trans. after Mallinson and Singleton 2017). The commentary adds: ‘one practised in recitation sees the gods, sages, and adepts, who help him in his task’. Given the central role played by Brahmins in the formation of this text, it seems likely that the svādhyāya referred to here is an adaptation of earlier models: daily recitation of Vedic mantras as a contemplative practice (see Bryant 2009: 273).

A related mantra practice is attested in Pāṭaṅjali’s codification of ‘meditative worship of the Lord’ (īśvarapraṇidhāna; 1.23 ff.), which Oberhammer considers the prototype of theistic meditation in yogic traditions (Oberhammer 1989). Two sūtras prescribe japa based on OM as a way to realise Īśvara, the ‘Lord’ of yoga. While the Vedic technique of reciting the praṇava adds emphasis to a verse and attracts divine attention, Pāṭaṅjali teaches that the praṇava should be murmured quietly on its own, drawing the practitioner’s attention inward (1.27–28). Echoing terminology used by early Sanskrit grammarians, the praṇava is the ‘verbal signifier’ (vācaka) of Īśvara (Angot 2008: 249). Yet the praṇava here has a ritual function that transcends everyday language — it is the sonic means by which the practitioner realises the deity, not unlike the use of OM as a contemplative ‘support’ (ālambana) in some Upaniṣads (Bryant 2009: 109). As Malinar observes, ‘OM is used to evoke … the god on which the concentration of the yogin is fixed’ (2007: 141).

Also relevant is the ‘auditory dimension of meditation’ (Beck 1993: 100) in the Pāṭaṅjalayogaśāstra. The work’s third section on ‘special powers’ (vibhūti, siddhi) resulting from
yoga includes a heightened sense of ‘listening’ (śrāvanā), which enables the ‘audition of divine sounds’ (divyaśābdaśāravānām). Additionally, contemplation of the connection between the ear (śrotām) and the primary medium of sound, ‘space’ (ākāśa), leads to ‘divine hearing’ (divyānī śrotām; 3.41). Since this section deals with the acquisition of powers with external effects, we may surmise that these sūtras refer to suprasensory audition, capable of picking up sounds at great distances, or extremely quiet stimuli. Such teachings remind us that techniques of listening in yoga do not always guide the practitioner’s perception inward for soteriological purposes – sometimes they pertain to the world outside the body.

Mantra meditation in the Maitrāyaṇīya Upaniṣad

The Maitrāyaṇīya Upaniṣad⁶ (c.600–700 CE) synthesises a wide array of Upaniṣadic teachings on yogic sound. A key mantra-based technique is ‘supreme fixation’ (parā dhīrāṇā; 6.18), which involves turning one’s tongue back on the soft palate, fixing the breath (prāṇa) in the central channel and chanting om (6.21). The paradigm of the yogic body (Padoux 2011: 103–11; 2017: 73–86; Samuel and Johnston 2013), emerging around this time, contrasts the subtle (sūkṣma) anatomy with the gross (sthūla) form of the physical body. The Maitrāyaṇīya Upaniṣad extends this notion to sound, which takes gross and subtle forms. Audible sounds are physical, material, discrete, inferior; subtle sounds are ethereal, immaterial, immanent, superior. Subtle sound emanates from the central channel (susūmnā), which conducts breath from the heart to the head. In a new take on the ancient episteme of ascent through sacrifice, this upward progression constitutes the soteriological ascent of sound through the yogic body: by using mantras in increasingly subtle forms, the practitioner moves upward towards liberation in the crown of his head.

Whereas earlier texts tend to employ technical terms (e.g. mantra, japa, pranava) when discussing sonic practices, the authors of the Maitrāyaṇīya Upaniṣad engage broadly with sound as an aesthetic and soteriological category. In one section, they teach meditation (abhi + śīhyāt) on the absolute (brahman) in two forms: ‘sound’ (śabda) and ‘non-sound’ (aśabda). OM, brahman in sonic form, is the contemplative support for attaining the non-sonic brahman: ‘Having risen up by means of OM, the practitioner reaches the syllable’s ending in non-sound’ (6.22). Another technique involves plugging the ears with the thumbs to make it possible to listen to the ‘sound within the space in the heart’. Using an array of descriptive sonic terms – several of them onomatopoetic in Sanskrit – the authors compare this inner soundscape to ‘the sound of rivers, or a bell, or a brass vessel, or a wheel, or the croaking of frogs, or rain, or a sound heard in a still place’ (6.22; trans. after van Buitenen 1962).

Tantric mantraśāstra and yogic sound

The second half of the first millennium CE witnesses the emergence of rich discourses on sacred sound in the early Hindu tantras (c.500–900 CE). In this period, yogic and tantric approaches to sound mutually influence each other to the point of overlapping – in the formulation of Padoux (2011: 1), yoga becomes ‘tantricized’. While maintaining continuities with Vedic ideology and practice, tantric ‘teachings on mantra’ (mantraśāstra) boast many new elements. Tantric mantras not only invoke deities, as in Vedic sacrifice – tantric mantras are deities in sonic form. Another innovation is the use of script: through diagrams (yantras, maṇḍalas), writing practices and syllabaries, the graphic forms of mantras are central to tantric mantraśāstra. And as in yoga, the body remains a crucial site for pursuing liberation: the practitioner undertakes elaborate internal visualisations and places mantras including potent seed syllables (bīja) on the energy centres (cakra) of the yogic body.
Tantric authors regard the entire cosmos as the emanation of the power (śakti) of kundalini, a feminine energy that animates sound and produces the constituents of language from which the universe springs. The cosmogonic emanation moves in a sonic sequence from the subtle arising to the audible sounding, and from the decaying resonance to the silent resorption. This macro-cosmic trajectory finds its microcosmic counterpart in the practitioner’s ‘utterance’ (uccāṇa) of the mantra, which moves up the central channel with the breath, from the base of the spine through the heart to the palate to the crown of the head (Padoux 1990: 140–42). Conceived as an ascent within the practitioner’s body, the mantra is enunciated in its gross form as audible sound, then rises into subtle forms including the ‘vibration’ (nāḍa), the reverberation of the mantra, and the ‘drop’ (bindu), its concentrated essence (as well as the written dot representing the nasal anusvāra). Beyond these is silence – the highest sonic state, correlated with the absolute. The circulation of ‘breath’ (prāṇa) is central to speculations about sound and speech in yogic and tantric texts alike, with breath’s movement conceived as a ‘goose’ in flight (haṃsa). Yogi and tantric authors divide the word haṃsa into two syllables, haṃ and sa, identified with inhalation and exhalation. In this way the practitioner’s every breath, waking and sleeping, gives voice to the mantra. Repeated in a cycle, the syllables change through euphonic combination to yield so ‘haṃ’, which can be understood as ‘I am that’, identifying the practitioner with the absolute or with a supreme deity such as Śiva (Padoux 2011: 140).

Sound and listening in hathayoga traditions

Influential exponents of the synthesis of tantra and yoga were the Nāthas, characterised by Bouy as blending yogic asceticism with tantric and Vedantic traditions (Bouy 1994: 5). Mallinson and Singleton have noted the lesser role of mantra among the Nāthas and other groups associated with hathayoga, suggesting that the emphasis on physical techniques over sacred sound is partly due to the influence of non-Brahmanical renouncers (śramaṇa), who opposed mantra cultures based on the Veda (Mallinson and Singleton 2017: 262–63). However, specific texts belonging to the hathayoga milieu show divergent attitudes to mantra, with some incorporating tantric mantra practice and others dismissing it as the lowliest of yogic techniques. Among the former, the muttered repetition (japa) of mantras and seed syllables – tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands, and even millions of times – can confer special powers, grant access to worldly pleasures and lead to liberation. For instance, the practitioner who chants the formula aṁ kliṁ ṣaḥ becomes irresistible to women with 100,000 repetitions, bends kings to his will with 600,000, gains a divine body and levitates with 1,800,000, becomes the equal of the great god Rudra with six million, until finally, ‘with ten million repetitions the great yogi is absorbed into the absolute’ (Śivasamhitā 5.232–251). Knowledge of mantras is jealously guarded: in the Khecarīvidyā, certain mantras are not given explicitly and instead must be extracted using coded instructions (1.38–39).

As in earlier traditions, there remains a close connection between mantra and breath: take, for example, the familiar haṃsa mantra, which is dubbed the ‘unmuttered’ (ajapā) gāyatrī because its utterance arises naturally through respiration (Vivekamārtanaṇḍa 28–30). Other authors question the efficacy of endless repetitions, suggesting that the subtle sounding of OM trumps myriad rounds of japa. Consider this verse of the fourteenth-century Kashmiri poet and mystic Lallā, one of the very few female voices in premodern yoga and tantra (Lallāvākyāṇi 2.34):

What use are a thousand mantras for one who has, by means of holding the breath, regularly moved from the navel the single mantra called oṁ up to the skull and who has made the mind to have oṁ as its only essence?
For Lallā, however, even om is merely a stopgap – the penultimate step before the final, emancipatory ‘worship of the Lord with the mantra called Silence’ (Lallāvīkyāṇī 2.40; all translations in the above section by Mallinson and Singleton 2017: 273–276).

Alongside mantra techniques in various forms, auditory practices are also attested in haṭha traditions. A signal example is a technique of deep listening that pertains to laya yoga as codified by the c.fourteenth-century Śivasamhitā (5.36–37, trans. Mallinson 2007; see also Powell 2018):

> When the yogin restrains the wind by tightly closing his ears with his thumbs, his eyes with his index fingers, his nostrils with his middle fingers, and his mouth with his ring fingers, and intently carries out this practice, then he immediately sees himself in the form of light.

Through this technique, the practitioner discerns ‘vibration’ (nāda) in its subtle forms and reaches a point of cognitive ‘dissolution’ (laya; Śivasamhitā 44–45).

The Hathapradīpiṇī, the influential fifteenth-century anthology of Śvātṛāma, codifies two auditory practices under the rubric of ‘concentration on inner sounds’ (nādānusandhāna; Powell 2018). One approach entails the manual closing of eyes, ears, nose and mouth so as to attune oneself to the movement of nāda within the central channel. The practitioner then hears a four-fold sequence of internal musical sounds, corresponding to his progress through the four stages of yoga and culminating in the emancipatory state of rājāyoga (Hathapradīpiṇī 65–77). In the other, the practitioner blocks his ears so as to discern ten types of natural and musical sounds within – from the waves of the ocean to the beat of a kettle drum to the buzzing of a bee. As he concentrates on this sonic progression from gross to subtle, his mind attains samādhi and becomes absorbed in the maximally subtle ‘noise of the unstruck sound’ (anāhatasya śabdasya dhvanir) – a vibration produced by no material impetus. Dissolved in this way, he attains the absolute, called ‘the soundless’ (niḥśabdam) (Hathapradīpiṇī 78–101).12

**Deep listening and silence in the Yoga Upaniṣads**

The blending of tantric and yogic practices finds its fullest expression in the Yoga Upaniṣads, medieval works on mantra meditation. Composed in north India in the first centuries of the second millennium CE – and later transmitted in expanded form in the south up through the early modern period – these works synthesise the non-dualist soteriologies of Vedānta, the nāda teachings of Nātha traditions and tantric approaches to sound and the yogic body, as Ruff has shown (2002). Although they are heterogeneous texts composed by different authors, most Yoga Upaniṣads share an interest in the cosmology, physiology and soteriology of sacred sound. Engaging the subtle manifestations of OM, haṃsa, nāda and bindu, the texts codify sonic practices that include visualisations, breath control and the body’s energy centres. In common with earlier texts, sound is instrumental to the attainment of brahmaṇ (Amṛtabindu Upaniṣad / Brahmabindu Upaniṣad, trans. Ruff 2012: 114): ‘Gaining union with the boundless by means of the sound om, one enjoys the highest reality.’

The mantra yoga codified by these works includes contemplation of subtle sound as it culminates in the ‘point’ – the concentrated essence of mantra (Dhyānabindu Upaniṣad, trans. after Ruff 2012: 115):

> The point (bindu) is more important than the syllables, it is more important than the reverberation (nāda). When the syllables and sound cease, then silence is the most amazing state.
This silence reverberates in the space within the heart: it is the constant and eternal sound, generated without material contact – again we encounter the 'unstruck sound' (anāhata nāda). Meditation on this inaudible, embodied sound leads to gnosis of the supreme self.

Sound, language and revelation: the Veda and beyond

All of the discourses examined so far assume a fundamental overlap between sacred sound and a particular language: Sanskrit. Vedic mantras represent Sanskrit in its purest form, unmediated by human authors (apauruṣeya). In the Vedic ideology of śruti, sages gain access to this revelation through powers of insight and then pass it on orally and aurally to their descendants. This outlook informs the orthodox stance of Brahmanical exponents of grammar (vyākaraṇa) and ritual theory (mīmāṃsā): Sanskrit is the 'root language' (mūlabhāṣya), 'the only language that was capable of making its meaning known directly' (Granoff 1991: 17), and hence the only acceptable language for ritual and learned discourse. This is not only a social claim, but also an ontological one: as the language of the Vedas (and later, the Tantras), Sanskrit is regarded as the universal, eternal language – and the one closest to absolute reality. In the system of the grammarian Bhartṛhari (c.fifth century CE), mastery of Sanskrit leads to liberation (Beck 1993: 65–66).

As Filliozat (2006) argues, the practice of yoga for grammarians entails purifying speech of its imperfections until it is completely 'perfected' (saṃskṛta) and distilled to its sonic essence (śabda), which in turn leads to revelation of its meaning (sphoṭa). For grammarians, this mode of inquiry brings the self into communion with the absolute.

Sacred sound in early renunciatory traditions

From this orthodox perspective, languages other than Sanskrit are deviations from the direct relation between perfected speech and absolute reality – and hence useless as a means to salvation. This position presented a challenge to the non-Brahmanical renunciatory traditions – the precursors of Buddhism and Jainism – whose early discourses were mostly conducted in Middle Indo-Aryan languages, including Ardhamāgadhī, Pāli, and various Prakrits; and whose founders – Siddhārtha and Mahāvīra in particular – are represented as preaching and conversing in these vernaculars. These same charismatic founders also criticised Brahmins and Vedic culture, including sacrifice and the use of Sanskrit mantras.

To navigate this terrain, as Bronkhorst (2015) has argued, some Buddhists and Jains came to think of the liberated founders as sonically disseminating wisdom in ways that did not require language – Sanskrit or otherwise. According to some accounts, these omniscient teachers used a 'monotone' (ekasvara) or 'divine sound' (Sanskrit divyadhvani; Prakrit Divvajhuni) that would automatically be intelligible to anyone listening, or else would require disciples to translate (Bronkhorst 2015). Lamotte (1970: 1380 n1, cited in Bronkhorst 2015: 14) argues that the Buddha's preaching is sometimes conceived as a unitary sound, compressed vocally into a single instant – this sound expressed the dhamma in its entirety, pervaded all the worlds, and conferred liberation. Castro-Sánchez adduces a similar account showing that the perfection of Buddha's speech, also known as 'the voice of Brahma’ (brahmasvara), spiritually transforms his listeners (Castro-Sánchez 2011: 23). In some Jain texts, sound flows without interruption from the liberated being's body and diffuses everywhere; moreover, it is 'sound' (dhvani) as distinguished from language: 'The speech of a tīrthankara has the form of sound, because it does not consist of syllables, and for this reason it is single’ (Dhavalā 1.1.50, trans Bronkhorst 2015: 12).

Masefield has made a case for the broader affinity between what he calls the 'dhamma of sound' in the Pāli canon – liberation through hearing the Buddha's preaching first-hand – and Vedic
śrutis (Masefield 1986).14 Thus, in spite of their differences and mutual contestations, early Brahmanical, Buddhist and Jain traditions can also be seen as partaking in a shared sensibility when it comes to sound, language and revelation.

Mantras and dhāranīs in early Buddhism

Notwithstanding this deep-seated affinity for sonic and auditory revelation, the instrumental use of mantras for soteriological purposes is strikingly absent from the earliest Buddhist and Jain traditions. Early on, non-Brahmanical traditions tended to emphasise ‘meditation’ (dhyāna) and ‘austerity’ (tapas) in the pursuit of liberation – pointedly excluding mantra-based practices. Nevertheless, early Buddhists and Jains did employ protective incantations and spells (rakṣa, parīta) to protect against snakebite or malevolent supernatural forces, or to gain special powers and effect magical transformations (Skilling 1992). Later testimony shows that some authorities prohibited such incantatory practices, especially when undertaken by monks on behalf of the laity to earn money (Davidson 2009: 113; Castro-Sánchez 2011: 21–22; Gough 2015: 82; Shah 1947: 114–15).

Yet already by the first centuries of the Common Era, Mahāyāna texts attest a sea-change in favour of mantra practices, spurred by widespread adoption of Sanskrit in this stream of Buddhist tradition. According to Castro-Sánchez, ‘a mastery of the Sanskrit grammar became one of the hallmarks of Bodhisattva training, [for one] who wanted to “acquire the skill in the cognition of sounds” (rutajñānakausālya)’ (Mahāprajñāpāramitāśāstra 162; Castro-Sánchez 2011: 26). Some Buddhist authors theorised mantras as the ‘word of the Buddha’ (buddhavacana) – and hence fulfilling mundane and supramundane goals alike (Castro-Sánchez 2011: 23). The sonic instrument of choice in Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna traditions was the dhāranī, functionally equivalent to mantra and akin to other types of formula known as vidyā (‘knowledge’) and hṛdaya (‘heart’) (Davidson 2009; Castro-Sánchez 2011). As Davidson has argued, dhāranī denotes not only a particular formula but also the cognitive faculties of memory, thought and speech: thus, a dhāranī is ‘a syllable/letter or word that represents the potential for unlimited, inexhaustible meaning in a concentrated form . . .’ (2009: 122).15 These Buddhist innovations in mantra culture made extensive use of script to encode sound: thus, dhāranīs are represented graphically in manuscripts, amulets, and syllabaries (2009: 120–23; Copp 2014).

By the second half of the first millennium CE, Buddhist authors codified fixed repertoires of dhāranīs and other such formulas, a trend that is embedded in the broader turn of these traditions towards tantric mantraśāstra. The Kāraṇḍavyūha Sūtra, a Śaiva-influenced disquisition on om maṇi padme hūṃ, celebrates this Buddhist mantra as ‘the six-syllable great formula’ (ṣaṅkalpavṛt mahāvidyā). Knowledge of this formula, the text promises, ensures the practitioner a desirable rebirth in the body of the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara (Studholme 2002: 61–62). In these and other tantrised contexts, the vocalisation of mantras and syllables has the effect of manifesting deities in sonic form, while their inscription in various media – diagrams, writing and the subtle body – fosters the practitioner’s visualisation and embodiment of the deity.

Mantras and meditation in Jain traditions

A similar rapprochement between renunciatory asceticism and mantra practice also occurred in Jain traditions, as Jain authors and ritualists developed their own distinctive brand of mantraśāstra (Gough 2015; see also Dundas 1998). Recent work by Gough (forthcoming) on mantras in Jainism offers insights into the role of sound in Jain yoga and meditation. Unlike Brahmanical authors of the first millennium CE, for whom chanting OM was the premier sonic practice, Jain authors from that
period forward promoted the recitation of the pañcanamaskāra, a litany in praise of the Five Supreme Lords, with the rationale that praise of enlightened beings leads to the eradication of karma. By the tenth century CE, when Jains start to use OM in ritual for soteriological purposes, this background shapes their approach: instead of emphasising recitational practices with OM, Jain authors instead focus on diagrams (yantra) linked to the Five Supreme Lords and employed in ‘virtuous meditation’ (dharmyadhyāna). Hemacandra’s twelfth-century Yogaśāstra (8.31), for instance, codifies meditation on a multicoloured OM diagram, whose various colours represent negative qualities to be destroyed through meditation, and whose overall form gives expression to the pure soul of the Jina. The Yogaprādīpa, a later Jain text on yoga, echoes the Brahmical Dhyānabindu Upaniṣad in emphasising meditation on OM as the ‘unstruck sound’ (anātha nāda). This refers to the subtle sonic resonance of OM, but perhaps also to the spiraloid representation of the syllable found in Jain yantras. Gough concludes that in Jainism, the ‘sounding … of om is far less important than focusing one’s mind on a physical representation of it’ (forthcoming: 18). Thus, Jains reimagine the continuum between sound and silence in their own way.

Islamic traditions of yoga and sound

Moving into the early modern period, the nexus of sound, listening and yoga becomes important in some Islamic contexts. While there is no space to delve into these developments – which speak to generative exchanges between Sufis, Nātha Yogis and Sikhs – we can mention a few key instances. Ernst (2003) brings our attention to an early description of yogic sound in the Sufi milieu, the thirteenth-century Amrtakunda (‘The Pool of Nectar’) – an Arabic text that recontextualises Sanskrit mantras in Islamic terms and gives rise to many subsequent translations and adaptations. As Gandhi (2018) has demonstrated, the Mughal prince Dara Shukoh studied Indian esoteric practices, including breath control and mantra meditation, under the tutelage of Sufi preceptors. Dara Shukoh’s writings mention the ajapa gāyatrī of yogic and tantric texts, equating the utterance so ‘ham (‘I am that’) with the Sufi practice of divine remembrance (žikr) by reciting huwa allah (‘He is God’). According to Vaudeville, the encounter between Islam and yoga also took other forms, such as the doctrine of the transcendent ‘word’ (śabda) shared by Gorakhnath, Kabir and the early Sants, which prizes internal revelation over scriptural authorities such as the Vedas or the Qur’ān. Another instance is the repeated murmuring of god’s name in devotional prayers (often called jap), which Kabir, among others, advocated as a path to liberation (Vaudeville 1993: 98–99). This cross-pollination of Sufism and yoga continued well into the British colonial period, as Green has shown with reference to the late-nineteenth-century circulation of printed pamphlets about contemplative breathing techniques, which encode ‘the intimate sounds of the history of colonialism’ (2008: 315).

Sound, chanting and mantra meditation in modern transnational yoga

The above survey is a highly selective account of how sound and yoga have mutually influenced each other in Indian religious traditions over the centuries. Can we extract an overarching theory of yogic sound from this bricolage of historicised accounts? Let us jump forward in time to briefly consider how today’s transnational yoga movements have received premodern ideas of yogic sound. Even as exponents of modern transnational yoga have approached mantra in new ways, they have simultaneously emphasised the authority of classical Indian paradigms.

The most high-profile of the transnational yoga movements focused on mantra emerged in the mid-twentieth century through the interactions of Indian gurus and western practitioners. Founded by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi and inspired by a fusion of Vedic, yogic and ayurvedic
ideals, Transcendental Meditation (TM) teaches the practitioner to silently meditate on a personal mantra (acquired at initiation) so as to foster serenity and stress reduction (Williamson 2010). Championed by celebrities from the Beatles to Jerry Seinfeld, TM has disseminated its techniques to millions of people and has sought to validate its health benefits through scientific studies (Lowe 2011). Systematised by the Sikh teacher Yogi Bhajan with reference to premodern discourses on kundalini energy (Deslippe 2012) and practised mostly by American Sikhs in conjunction with Sikh Dharma International (Khalsa 2012), Kundalini Yoga is a fusion of modern postural yoga, breath control and Sikh mantras. Chanting is a central feature: a typical sequence might include assuming a pose, breathing in a rhythmic fashion and repeating the formula sat nam. Perhaps the most visible of all the transnational mantra movements is the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), or the Hare Krishna movement, founded by Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada to promote Gaudiya Vaishnavism around the world. Sound – especially the chanting of devotional songs (bhajan) in praise of Krishna – is the preferred way for Hare Krishna adherents to practise the yoga of devotion (bhakti) and transmit ‘Krishna consciousness’ to others (Bhaktivedanta Book Trust 1983). Practitioners also undertake daily personal regimens of japa, muttering the Hare Krishna mantra repeatedly while keeping count using prayer beads (Rochford 2007).

We finish this survey of sound and yoga back where we began: the modern yoga studio. Mantras are a core component of many contemporary practices, especially to begin and end a practice. On the teacher’s cue, practitioners utter a given formula together, whether it is the invocation of Patañjali, variations of the gāyatrī mantra, the lokāḥ samastāḥ formula or simply OM (Nevrin 2004). Perusing major yoga magazines and online platforms reveals a host of articles, courses and workshops on using sacred sound in postural and contemplative practice (e.g. Creel 2018; Moroz Alpert 2017). Another recent trend in transnational yoga culture is the sound bath, in which a sound artist uses acoustic and electronic instruments to create an immersive soundscape to clear energy blockages, reduce anxiety and promote wellbeing (e.g. Kercher 2015; Mazurek 2017). Also worth mentioning is the global popularity of kīrtan, a call-and-response form inspired by Indian devotional traditions (Graves 2017), in which singers, musicians and participants collectively perform songs of prayer or praise (Jacobs 2017).

Conclusion: the unstruck sound

From the Vedas through sound baths, the examples we have considered herein demonstrate the richness and diversity of yogic approaches to sound and listening, bringing in a wide array of doctrines, practices and media. Notwithstanding the prominence of Brahmins and the authority of Sanskrit texts, other voices have found ways to shape thinking on sound and yoga. And in spite of the fact that universalist claims are central to this discourse, yogic sound has never been monolithic, but always multiformal – adherence to tradition has gone hand in hand with innovations and ruptures. At the same time, however, our survey suggests remarkable continuities across millennia. Yoga has always been a strategy for cultivating sacred soundscapes: the attentive engagement of mantra, mind and body in pursuit of supramundane states characterises most traditions. And yoga is fundamentally a technique of deep listening: the practitioner strives to perceive sounds – mantras, syllables and vibrations in gross and subtle forms – that are perpetually immanent but not always manifest.

By way of conclusion, consider once again the unstruck sound, that cosmic vibration undetectable by the human ear yet perceptible to the practitioner who listens to the sound within his heart. This embodied sound offers a path to liberation, in that it serves as a support for meditating on the self and its relation to a supreme deity or the absolute. Yet the unstruck sound
also constitutes the condition of liberation, in that to hear it is to be fully absorbed in a transcendent condition. Returning finally to the questions posed at the start of this chapter – ‘what is the significance of sound for understanding yoga? And yoga for sound?’ – I offer this formulation: yoga is meditation through sound (understood as a technique of chanting that supports contemplative states), meditation on sound (as a technique of listening that leads to emancipatory absorption) and meditation towards sound (as the highest soteriological goal, identical with the self, the highest deity or the cosmic absolute).

Glossary

agni, Vedic god of fire, kindled at sacrifice
ajapà gāyatṛ, the unmuttered version of the gāyatṛ mantra; esoteric name for the haṃsa mantra
akāśa, space; the medium in which sound moves
akṣara, imperishable; syllable; the absolute
ālambana, support; mantra or other technique used to cultivate contemplative states
ānāhata nāda; ānāhata sābda, unstruck vibration, unstruck sound; name for internal, subtle sound, representing the cosmic absolute
anirukta, indistinct, unexpressed; mode of chanting mantras so that the words are replaced by non-lexical syllables
anuvāna, nasalisation of vowel; represented in script by a dot
apauruṣeya, not of human origin; reference to Veda as divine revelation
Ardhamāgadhī, Middle Indo-Aryan language of some Jain texts
AUM, esoteric variant of the sacred syllable OM based on analysis of its constituent phonemes
bhajan, devotional song in Hindu traditions
bhūr bhuvah svār, earth, atmosphere, heaven; expiatory formula chanted in Vedic sacrifice
bindu, dot, point, drop; the concentrated essence of a mantra; nasalisation of a syllable, represented in script by a dot
bijā, seed syllable; the most potent and concentrated form of mantra
brahman, poetic formulation; the cosmic absolute; name for the supervisory priest in Vedic sacrifice
cakra, circle; energy centre in the yogic body
dhamma, the Buddha’s teaching
dhāraṇā, fixation; contemplative practice of fixing one’s attention on a mantra or other support
dhāraṇī, mantra or formula in Tantric Buddhism
dhvani, sound
dhyāna, meditation
dīryam śrūtam, divine hearing; suprasensory audition
dīryadhvani, divine sound; name for suprasensory sound that emanates from the Jina
haṃsa, goose; esoteric name for formula haṃ so ḍhaṃ so ḍhaṃ sa …, which corresponds to the breath
japa, muttering, murmuring; characteristic register of chanting mantras in yoga
jāpaka, practitioner of japa
kauśalya, isolation; the soteriological aim of Pātañjala yoga
kīrtan, call-and-response song in devotional traditions of yoga and Hinduism
kuṇḍalinī, coiled; feminine power associated with the upward flow of breath and energy in the subtle body
māṇasa, mental; mode of silently meditating on mantras
maṅgala, benediction; auspicious formula in Jain traditions
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mantra, formula, usually in Sanskrit, used in chanting or meditation
mantraśāstra, the knowledge of mantra, associated with Tantric traditions
nāda, reverberation, vibration; subtle sound arising in the resonance of the chanted mantra
nirukta, distinct; mode of chanting mantras so that their meaning is understood clearly
OM (om, oṃ, ōṁ), sacred syllable of Indian religions; essence of the Vedas; supreme seed syllable and mantra
om mani padme hūṁ, the six-syllabled formula of Avalokiteśvara; supreme mantra of early Buddhism
Pāli, Middle Indo-Aryan language of some Buddhist texts
pañcanamaskāra, a litany in praise of the Five Supreme Lords of Jainism
Prakrit, Middle Indo-Aryan language(s) of some Jain and Buddhist texts
parīta, spell in Buddhist and Jain texts
prāṇava, humming; recitational technique of adding om to Ṛgvedic mantras; generic name for OM as a sacred syllable
prāṇa, breath
ṛ, verse belonging to the Ṛgveda
Ṛgveda, one of four Vedas; corpus of mantras and interpretations pertaining to reciting verses in Vedic sacrifice
Sāman, melody belonging to the Sāmaveda
Sāmaveda, one of four Vedas; corpus of mantras and interpretations pertaining to chanting melodies in Vedic sacrifice
śabda, sound; word; distillation of language
śakti, feminine power of mantras, syllables, script, language
śiddhi, supernatural power acquired through yoga
śphoṭa, burst; intuition of sound or word’s meaning
śravaṇam, faculty of hearing; audition
śruti, that which is heard; Veda as aural revelation
sthūla, gross; external aspects of body or utterance, perceptible to normal senses
sūkṣma, subtle; internal aspects of body or utterance, imperceptible and suprasensory
sūltān al-zikr, emperor of divine remembrances; contemplative technique that includes suprasensory audition in Sufi traditions
suṣumna, gracious; name for central channel of subtle body through which breath and energy flow
svādhāya, personal recitation of mantras for mastery, worship, or meditation
tūṣyām, silently; mode of internally chanting mantras
uccā, rising; utterance of mantra in Tantric traditions, conceived as ascent of sound through the body
upāṃśu, quiet; mode of muttering mantras
vāc, Vedic goddess of speech; language
Veda, knowledge; mantras and prose texts forming the sacred corpus of Brahmanical traditions
vibhūti, supernatural power acquired through yoga
vidyā, knowledge; mantra or formula in Tantric traditions
Yajurveda, one of four Vedas; corpus of formulas and interpretations pertaining to making offerings in Vedic sacrifice
yajus, prose formula belonging to Yajurveda
yantra, ritual diagram used in Tantric traditions
yukti, yoking, union; Sāmavedic rite of uniting practitioner’s mind with the liturgy through mantra meditation
Notes

1 I am grateful to the editors of this volume, the participants in the ‘Disciplines and Dialogue: The Future of Yoga and Meditation Studies’ workshop at SOAS, and Richard Williams for their thoughtful engagement with this chapter.

2 While this chapter uses ‘sound’ as shorthand for sonic practices and auditory practices together, certain sections contrast sound as sonic vibration with listening as auditory modality. Moreover, in this chapter ‘yoga’ (without italics) denotes the general category of yogic doctrines and practices; while yoga (with italics) denotes the term as used in specifics texts and contexts. Unless indicated otherwise, all unattributed translations of Sanskrit terms and passages are my own.

3 R. Murray Schafer defined ‘soundscape’ in broad terms as ‘any aural area of study’ (1993 [1977]: 7). Yet as Ari Kelman has shown, the term’s subsequent popularity has often elided Schafer’s ‘ideological and ecological messages about which sounds “matter” and which do not’ (2010: 214) – Kelman suggests that Schafer’s soundscape is fundamentally prescriptive, ‘favoring the ideal over the actual, and the interior over the exterior’ (ibid.: 223). As such, the term soundscape is well suited to yoga, which privileges ideal, interiorised practices of sound and listening; notably, Schafer himself compares yogic mantra meditation to ‘headphone listening’ (1993 [1977]: 119).

4 Previous scholars have fruitfully explored the crossroads of sound and Indian religions. To name a few:

5 Alongside Bull and Back’s use of the term, Becker’s use of ‘deep listening’ (2004) to refer to the practice of entering into trance states through music is also relevant to yogic sound.

6 For convenience, this chapter will refer to the syllable in general with the capitalised form ‘OM’, while using the lowercase, italicized variants in discussions of specific passages.

7 Thus, the verse ending dhenuñāṁ ṣuṣṭhpasyasi (Ṛgveda 8.69.2) is transformed in performance to dhenuñāṁ ṣuṣṭhyaśoṁ (Aitareya Āraṇyaka 5.1.6; see Gerety 2015: 81).

8 According to van Buitenen (1962: 13, 21–24), the various recensions of this text have gone by different names related to the Yajurvedic Maitrāyaṇiṇī school, including Maitrāyaṇīya, Maitrāyaṇa, Maitrāyaṇī, Maitrī, Maitrī and Maitreyā Upaniṣad.

9 On maṇḍalas and meditation, see Bühnemann, Chapter 29 in this volume.

10 The high-flying goose symbolises breath already in the Kaṭha Upaniṣad (5.3). As Vogel 1962 convincingly demonstrates, haṃsa denotes a goose (not a ‘swan’ as frequently translated).

11 Texts such as the Khecārīvyādā and Śūrasamhitā teach tantric mantra practices, while others like the Dattāṭreyaṣayogaśāstra circumscribe mantra practice or dismiss it entirely; Mallinson and Jason Birch, personal communication.

12 According to Mallinson and Birch (personal communication), the Ṣaṭkāraṇīṇikā’s teachings on nāda derive from two different streams of Haṭha textual tradition. The first (70–77) is from the Amanāthaḥprahodha, which in turn takes its teachings from the Amṛtasiddhi; the second (78–99) is untraced but seems to incorporate material from various Śaiva Tantras.

13 It seems tempting to conceive this unitary divine sound as OM – yet the evidence for this is lacking.

14 This idea is affirmed by Castro-Sánchez (2011: 23n22), who observes that the concept of Buddha’s perfected speech may be understood as a Buddhist adaptation of the twin Upaniṣadic doctrines of speech as the embodiment of absolute reality and of the identity of speech and dharma.

15 Like the yogic technique of dhānaṇā (‘fixation’) – also derived from the Sanskrit verb root ṣdhṛ- ‘to hold’ – dhānaṇā conveys the idea of ‘holding’ something in mind; see Davidson 2009: 111.

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