

How Chanting Boosts Health

A few months ago, I realized that I consistently need less sleep than before. I used to sleep 9 hours and wake feeling tired. Now I wake up after 5 hours and feel refreshed. What's up? One morning at 3am, as I eagerly rose to start my day, I remembered a story, from the book Chant, by Katherine Le Mée. It explains how chant energizes and heals us. If you want more time (and health) in your life, read on . . .

“There is a story told by French physician and internationally renowned ear specialist Dr. Alfred Tomatis in an interview with Canadian writer and radio producer Tim Wilson. Dr. Tomatis visited a Benedictine monastery in France just after the Second Vatican Council in the early 1960's, when there was some discussion as to whether the Latin language should be retained for daily worship or whether the vernacular French, which was encouraged by the Council, should be adopted. Also under consideration was whether chanting should be continued or abandoned in favor of other activities thought to be more useful. The final outcome was the elimination of chant from the Divine Office.

Before long a change took place in the community. Monks who previously had been able to survive rather well on the customary three or four hours of sleep a night became extremely tired and prone to illness. Thinking that too little sleep might be the cause of their malaise, the abbot allowed more, but this did not help. The more the monks slept, the more tired they became. Even a change of diet was attempted—to a meat and potatoes regime, after vegetarianism had been the rule of the community for 700 years—but this too had no positive result.

The situation grew worse and worse until February 1967 when Dr. Tomatis was invited back to the monastery again to see if he could help with the problem. In the same interview Dr. Tomatis recalls that, when he arrived, “seventy of the ninety monks were slumped in their cells like wet dish rags.” Upon examination, he found that the monks were not only tired but that their hearing was not as good as it should have been. His solution to the problem was to use a device called the Electronic Ear to increase the monk's auditory sensitivity over a period of several months. The Electronic Ear, developed by Tomatis, is a cybernetic device with two channels joined by a gate which gives the patient sounds as normally hear on one side and, on the other side, the same sound filtered to allow an improved audition, particularly of high frequencies. Changing channels from one side to the other exercises the muscles of the inner ear and makes it possible for the patient to regain auditory acuity and sensitivity. The other aspect to Dr. Tomatis's treatment was to have the daily chanting brought back immediately into the life of the monastery.

Within nine months the monks had experienced an extraordinary improvement, both in their ability to hear and in their general sense of health and well-being. Most were able to

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return to the way of life that had been normal in their community for so many hundreds of years—the extended periods of prayer, short nights of sleep, and the demanding schedule of physical work.

What happened? Continuing the interview with Mr. Wilson, Dr. Tomatis went on to explain the vital role played by the ear in stimulating the brain's activity: in particular, it serves to charge the cerebral cortex with electrical potential. It is clear, then, that a person with poor hearing is unable to effectively receive the charge of energy being provided by the ear.

A well-tuned ear is able to stimulate the brain—but there is more to the story. Modern research identifies two kinds of sound, known as “discharge” sounds, which tire and fatigue the listener, and “charge” sound, which give energy and health and with have the power, like the Electronic Ear, to re-awaken the hearing and recharge the mind and body with energy.

Charge sounds are rich in high frequencies, whereas discharge sounds are of low frequency. Tomatis, in his book The Conscious Ear, has compared a number of languages in terms of their frequency range, that is, their potential for providing this energy charge to the brain, and finds British English particularly high with a range of selectivity of 2,000 to 2,000 hertz and North American English, from 800 to 3,000 hertz. In speaking or singing it is not as important to have a highly pitched voice as it is to increase the generation of sounds in the high-frequency range. High frequencies in British English are due to the number of plosive sounds and the generally clipped way of speaking.

Dr. Tomatis points out that putting an oscilloscope to the sounds of Gregorian Chant reveals that it contains all the frequencies of the voice spectrum, roughly 70 to 9,000 hertz, but with a very different envelope curve from that of normal speech. The monks sing in the medium range—that of a baritone—but due to the unity and resonance of the sound, their voices produce rich overtones of higher frequency. It is these high tones, mainly in the range of 2,000 to 4,000 hertz that provide the charge to the brain. When the monks referred to earlier were not chanting, they were missing their daily dose of energy. It is not difficult to understand the feeling of fatigue that they experienced.

These energies are very small in measurable terms. This is why they are often thought of as being of a subtle nature. The fact is that it is not their energetic content (i.e. the quantity of watt-seconds, ergs, or any other measure we may care to use) that is important, but the information they carry. To draw a simple analogy: it is not the power of the signal sent millions of miles away to a space probe that matters so much as the shape of the energy that carries the information that operates a device or sends a series of pictures back to earth.

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The way the monks receive energy through the sound is that it acts partly as a signal which, through the complex organization of the body and its energy fields, serves to reorganize the energy distribution within the body. The result is a sense of gaining energy or losing energy, depending on how these energies are redistributed within the centers.

From the point of view of the listener there is one further point to be made. We receive energy from listening to the chant but at the same time experience calm and tranquility. This is due to the fact that we can participate in the same pattern of deep and peaceful breathing as the monks or nuns chanting the long, melismatic lines of Gregorian chant. Most texts and melodies for Gregorian chant can be found in the *Liber Usualis*, the Benedictine's daily song book. Many texts can also be found in any Missal or Breviary published before the Second Vatican Council in the early 1960's. Unfortunately, these books are no longer in print. However, if you can find a copy of the *Liber Ursulis*, try singing along with a recording.

Excerpted from Chant, by Katherine Le Mée, p. 123-128

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