

## History of Toning

The history of toning starts with our first cry at birth, the “Mmmm” at our mother’s breast, the “Ahhhh” of satisfaction, the “Ohhhh” of a groan, the high “Eeeee” of surprise and delight, wailing, cooing, sounds of connection and self-stimulation...the food of the Soul.

These vowels bypass the intellectual content of meaning and are purely emotional, basic biological communication of how something feels, how something moves us, either emanating from within or as a response to an outside stimulus. These sounds bypass culture, family, race, they are a universal response to life. These sounds are not only the sounds of our early infancy and childhood; I believe they are stored in our genes from the time we first walked upon the earth as Homo sapiens. We are human, from humus, the earth. These sounds are part of what make us human.

Vowels are first, consonants are later constructs that help further shape and define meaning. But the vowels are primary. These sounds of Ah, Oh, Ou, I and E are from a deep old part of our brain, from the limbic system which houses our wordless response to life. In Egyptian and Hebrew cultures vowels were sacred, they were not written in text and had to be sounded out so that a word’s meaning could be determined. Text and speech were not separate but were connected, living streams of words that were made holy by the vowels which only require breath to be sounded.

Much of this early sounding is lost to time, although it still exists in oral traditions throughout the world. We have no records other than the air itself and the sacred sites made of stone that may have acted like early tape recorders, storing information within the stone's crystalline matrix. Stones still resonate with this information that may have been vowel oriented. There are writings to suggest that Egyptian priests intoned seven vowels in their initiation ceremonies. Later, Gregorian Chant used extended vowel sounds which resonated through cavernous cathedral naves.

The word toning was coined by Laurel Elizabeth Keyes in her book *Toning* which came out in 1973. She defines toning as "an ancient method of healing...the idea is simply to restore people to their harmonic pattern."<sup>1</sup>

Her method of toning is done standing with eyes closed and starting with a groan. Allow the voice to ascend higher and higher like a siren and continue until a natural sigh is released. I initially learned this method in 1974 and took a workshop with her when I was studying music therapy at the University of Kansas. Though interesting I didn't take to Keyes method of toning.

There are many different flavors of toning, from the harmonic chant of David Hykes to Jonathan Goldman and the late Don Campbell. Many toning groups use vowel sounds as a form of healing, to come into harmony with oneself and others, or as a meditation. My biggest influence has been Susan Osborn who sang with the Paul Winter Consort and now teaches throughout the world, primarily in Japan.

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<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Goldman, *Healing Sounds*, p. 136

Susan believes, and I with her, that it is important to explore the compost, to explore body sounds that we often reject. Out of these “compost sounds” the flower of the voice will bloom. I have experienced this again and again both with myself and with the groups that I lead. Our natural sounds have been repressed for so long that a space needs to be created to explore our voices, not for the purpose of catharsis, but for an acknowledgement of the parts of ourselves that have been silenced. I believe this is a more feminine approach to the voice, allowing and coaxing sounds so that a deeper connection with the soul voice can be made. Susan Osborn wrote a beautiful song that expresses this sentiment for me:

A river of sorrow cut through me  
Cut through me, cut through me  
A river of sorrow cut through me  
Cut through me, cut through me  
And now a vast canyon of space  
Lives in me and breathes in me  
And now a vast canyon of space  
Lives in me and breathes in me  
And music makes its home there  
And each day she arises  
And sings the day into being

I believe that our body sounds, our emotional sounds, when given voice will over time carve a space within where our true voice can emerge. Toning is like creating an interior cathedral where the Spirit within our breath can resonate.

Toning can be defined in many different ways and has been used by many different teachers and healers. Don Campbell defines toning as “the conscious elongation of sound using the breath and voice.”<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Goldman calls toning “the use of the voice as an instrument of healing.”<sup>3</sup>

I define toning, especially when I am working with beginning groups, as a simple way to find and free the natural voice using breath and sound. Toning can also be a journey into the body, into its spaces, aches, pains and stored emotions to allow them to be released. Toning can also be a journey into a mythic landscape, a discovery of silent interiors that come to life when given voice. Toning can use groans, moans, hums, sighs and other sounds. Toning has also been called ‘Sounding’ or ‘Creating a Soundscape.’

I believe toning is a way of listening. One learns to listen more deeply. The first step is to listen to the body and emotions. As toning progresses a deeper listening to one’s self and others takes places which leads to listening to the Spirit within all things. When this level of toning is reached, the individual merges into the *Voice, the Breath of God*. There is an African saying that the Spirit will not descent without song.

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<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Goldman, *Healing Sounds*, p. 136

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

Group and individual toning sessions can be short or long but I find that longer ones are necessary to reach deeper levels of Self and Spirit. A minimum of eight minutes is usually needed for this shift to take place. Often the first toning of a group is more body oriented. A general rule of thumb when toning in a group is not to tone so loud that you can no longer hear others.

### **My History with Toning**

I have been using toning in my groups since 1979. At that time I was more focused on The Bonny Method of Guided Imagery and Music, mandalas, ritual, chanting and creative movement. I was using toning as a warm-up to chanting and found it a useful technique but didn't explore it fully until the work with Susan Osborn.

At that time I was living in Albuquerque, New Mexico doing workshops and classes out of my home and then later an office. I created a tape called Circle the Earth with Song and began to focus more on voice. I had a 6 week class called Joy of Singing and used toning and chanting as a means to find and free the natural voice. One class changed my concept of the rich gifts that toning has to offer. This new group comprised of women between the ages of 30-60. They were nurses, counselors, students, mothers, widows, incest survivors and artists. All this group wanted to do was tone. Occasionally we would chant but this group had something to say beyond most of the chants I taught. This group had questions that needed to be answered:

- How can we express our power as women without having power over anyone?

- Do we dare to be powerful?
- What does power mean to a woman?
- Can we be fully present in our bodies?
- How do we respond and give to others without denying ourselves?
- Can we take a risk to be different?
- Can we speak our truth and stand by it?

One woman asked if I can lead a chant that would address this question and I suggested that we write our own chants. The songwriting process brought out a dissonant power struggle. We each had our own ideas and our own need to be heard. Several were afraid that their contribution wasn't worth anything and were afraid of being rejected. Yet risk is an act of power, daring to be heard regardless of what another thinks. After much risk taking this chant was born:

*Are you a woman of power?*

*Can you be here now?*

*Are you a woman of light?*

*Can you see here now?*

*Are you a woman of wisdom?*

*Can you speak what you know?*

*Can you be who you are?*

*Yes, I'm a woman of power.*

*I am here now.*

*Yes, I'm a woman of light.*

*I see here now.*

*Yes, I'm a woman of wisdom.*

*I speak what I know.*

*I am who I am.*

*I am..... (Improvise freely)*

As we sang the song together the women's voices grew in strength and power from having created something together. Then we sang it as a call and response chant. I sang the questions and then each woman was asked to respond. The voices suddenly got small again. "I can't sing alone. I thought I could just blend in and respond with the rest of the group." one woman revealed. I sang a new question. "Are you a woman of power? Can you sing alone?" I guided her to take three full deep breaths and listen to the place in her that was afraid, as well as the place in her that wanted to sing and be heard. She sang back with strength.

To be a woman of power is to have a voice in the world. It's safe to be in a group, to blend in and allow the other voices to support our newly emerging voice. I am sensitive to this issue and provide a safe place for women to explore, because there has been so much wounding. This group was calling for something different. They were risk-takers and wanted to move beyond their fears. This process brought each woman to a new precipice within herself, and within me as a group leader.

The songwriting process also deepened our group process. A foundation had been set. When the class came to the end of six weeks all but one woman wanted to continue. I suggested we meet for another six weeks. After six six week classes the group decided they wanted to be an on-going group, first meeting weekly and then twice a month. Many of our meetings are described in the chapter on Women's Voices in my book *Song and Silence: Voicing the Soul* (1995, La Alameda Press, Albuquerque, New Mexico) Twenty years later many of the original group are still meeting and at least one spin-off group has formed and has been meeting since 1996.

Our group process was to tone at least three times and to pass a singing stick we created after the tonings as a way to give words to our more primal sounds and inner process. Each woman spoke uninterrupted while the others listened.

One night, after our initial toning, one woman said she felt "wimpy" because she had silenced herself. She followed the other voices rather than singing out the words she heard inside. She was afraid she would break a rule or that the group would think she was weak if she sang out, "Take my hands and accept me."

"That is not a wimpy statement," another woman reflected back to her then asked, "Is there a way to tone honesty?"

While toning *is* about honesty, we sat with the question and listened into the body of honesty with each of us. We listened in a new way to the archetype of honesty. The

woman who had silenced herself began with deep low tones from her guts. We each added our voices and the toning gradually rose like a siren with piercing, straight as an arrow sounds which gathered in intensity. The sound erupted together and then quieted into ancient voices, wind voices, whispers.

We passed the singing stick. The primal stirrings our sounds had evoked were still reverberating through us. Some shook with emotion as they spoke. One woman felt that “eons of pain, anger and suffering had been healed.” Another added that we “sounded like a laser beam, a beacon of light piercing through illusion.” Another spoke about lesser truths and that make you feel like you’ve been slashed and that “true honesty doesn’t carry judgment. It’s the judgments that hurt.”

We talked about the toning experience being a deep and honest listening. We listen inside, listening for the truth and give this to the group as the truth of who we are in the moment. When one woman is inspired, when a deep honest sound comes straight from the soul, there is a magnetizing effect on the rest of the group. The other voices gravitate towards the truth.

Toning is about finding center, finding our center through deep listening, finding the center of the group and adding to the center with our truth. There is a tangibly felt sense that each time we tone we are creating something in the center that is greater than the sum of our voices.

## Toning

Toning is a way to listen into the body and give voice to what is found there. Toning is before technique. It connects us with the primal source of sound, the ancient well which lives inside of each person. Toning is a spontaneous expression of our life force. We can pull sound up from the roots of our lives: our hopes, fears, frustrations, sorrows and joys. We mix these with breath. Toning transforms emotions into radiant tones. It can help us to restore our voices and restore our lives. It is not a cure but a means to bring wholeness. Toning is a simple and profound way of voicing the soul. More than anything it is a process of listening, listening through the breath to what we feel inside ourselves. We are also listening through the breath to Spirit. When we tone with a group we are also listening to the other voices, and as we become part of a deeper listening together, Spirit sings through us.

Sometimes, at the beginning of toning, especially in a new group, inner critics or silencers will appear. Many people have been silenced and the silencer is then interjected as a form of protection to keep us from being hurt again. But as we grow we need to find a way to re-negotiate with the protectors, let them know that it is safe now to express through the voice. Everyone has a different relationship with these inner voices which may need different strategies. For some people the voice is more of a judge or inner critic. Take a moment to acknowledge these judges and then send them out for a walk. Invite them to return to help you evaluate your experience.

First try some sighs with me. Acknowledge whatever nervousness or self-consciousness or excitement you might feel and send them out as sighs. This is the beginning of toning.

Toning is an expression of our emotional selves. It is an efficient way to move emotion through the body so that it doesn't get stuck there. It is a form of self-tuning. We all have sounds inside that we may stifle because in our culture they may have been considered socially inappropriate. Here is an Introduction to Toning:

When you are out driving and you turn a corner and see the full harvest moon rising over a mountain you might be moved to make this sound: "Ahhhhh," a sound of awe and surprise. Ah is the sound of the heart and cleanses the heart. Place your hand on your heart and try it with me, "Ahhhhh", again "Ahhhhh", once more "Ahhhhh."

Or maybe you're running late and get a phone call from someone who won't let you go. You know this will make you late for an important appointment but it's almost impossible to stop this person from talking. Finally you get off the phone and might have an impulse to make a sound like this: "Aarghhhh," a sound of frustration. Try it with me, "Arghhhh," again "Arghhhh", once more "Arghhhh."

Perhaps you are enjoying your favorite food, maybe fresh sweet strawberries or a slice of apple pie. With your first taste you might make this sound: "Mmmmm." Try it with me, "Mmmmm," again "Mmmmm," once more "Mmmmm."

When a crying child walks into a room with a skinned knee you might make the sympathetic sound of “Ouuuu”. Try it with me, “Ouuuuu,” again “Ouuuu,” one last time “Ouuuuu.”

Then there is the sound pain. We instinctively groan when we have a stomach ache or a body pain. Put your hand on your stomach and let yourself groan like this: “Ohhhhhh,” again “Ohhhhhh,” one more time “Ohhhhhh.”

When you are delighted and surprised you might make the high sound “Eeeee.” Like a child saying “Wheeeeeee.” Try it with me “Eeeeeee,” again “Eeeeeee,” one more time “Eeeeeee.” E is sonic caffeine.

Are there any other sounds you can think of to make, perhaps sounds you hear children make. Examples: Boo, Hmmm, Yuck. What other instinctual sounds can you think of. Let’s make them together three times.

Now pause for a minute, taking a few deep breaths in through the nose and out through the mouth. Now let’s try some sound mirroring. I’ll make a sound twice. Listen to the sound I make the first time. The second time you hear the sound make it with me.

Wheeeee      Wheeeee

Uh oh      Uh oh

Lalalala      Lalalala

Myohmyohmyohmy      Myohmyohmyohmy

Whoosh    Whoosh  
Hiyahiyahiyahi    Hiyahiyahiyahi  
Puppy sound    Puppy sound  
Lip buzz    Lip buzz

### Toning

General Instructions before toning: To tone we will be breathing in through the nose and out through the mouth three times. First you will notice the sound of your out-breath. Allow your breath to become more audible. As you continue to breath in through your nose and out through your mouth allow some body sounds to ride on your out-breath, releasing any tensions or nervousness you might feel. You will be breathing into these tensions and allow them to be voiced as sighs, groans and yawns. After you have expressed these body sounds, any sounds that feel good for your body to make, give them a little more breath and extend them into tones. You can stay on one note or explore many notes. At first your toning will be discharging tensions on the surface but as you continue to tone you will learn more to listen to yourself, and listen to the group, to give voice to your soul. There are many different layers of toning as we sound through physical, emotional, and spiritual realms together. A general rule of thumb when toning with a group is to make sure that you can hear the other people in the group so your sounds won't dominate. We will find our own stopping place by listening. Sit in silence. I will bring you back by asking you to move your fingers, hands, feet, head and neck. Then we will pass around a talking staff to share.

Now let's tone together...Breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth three times at your own pace. On the out-breath allow some sighs and yawns to emerge, remembering that your voice and tones will sound different from my voice and the voices of other people in the group...Breathing in again through your nose and out through your mouth continue to sigh and breathe into whatever you are feeling and allow these sounds to ride on your out-breath...Continue these sighs and sounds with me...When you're ready extend these sounds into prolonged tones and explore.....

...Now take a moment to be with the silence...Breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth three more times at your own pace, claiming whatever sounds you made...Now bring your awareness to your hands and slowly move your hands...Bring your awareness to your feet by slowly moving your feet...Bring your awareness to your head and neck by slowly turning your head from side to side...Now give yourself a stretch and a yawn and open your eyes with a soft focus back into the room.

Take a moment to notice any changes in your body. Raise your hand or nod if you could feel sensations in your body. Do you feel more relaxed? More energized? Did you notice any changes in your emotions? Did you feel any emotions surface? Now take a moment to notice any other changes. Were you aware of colors or images? Did any memories surface? Does your mind feel clearer, released from its constant chatter? Did the toning sound like something to you? Did it feel like you inside someplace? Was there a story, like finding yourself inside a dream?

Share with a talking staff. I like to use something musical.

Each time you tone you will sound and feel different. Your voice will be different. Sometimes you might tone for five minutes or longer, releasing sounds of pain and stress. At other times your toning may be very calm or meditative. You might get into a melodic pattern and may hear words that you can use to make up a song or a chant afterwards. You may surprise yourself with hearing sounds you didn't know you could make, or sounds that seem like they belong to another language. You might contact deeper feelings below the surface of your conscious awareness or receive guidance from your inner wisdom.

The important thing with toning is to remember if to follow your in-breath and out-breath with a release of sound. Don't judge your voice but allow it to be wherever it is. You are never alone when you tone. Spirit is in your breath supporting your sounds.

Each toning is a unique celebration of your potential. As you tone more you will begin to listen to deeper layers of your body, mind and soul, deeper waters within the magic pond of your voice.

You will refine your listening to yourself, others and to the world around you. Your body will begin to educate your voice as to how to produce sounds. You will extend and deepen the range of your voice. You will add more color and texture to both your speaking and your singing voice and instinctively learn how to take the sounds and colors you find in toning into singing a song.

Susan Elizabeth Hale C 2010

## Exercises for Sound Health

### Vowels

I - resonates head cavity

E - resonates throat and upper chest

A - resonates chest cavity

Ah – resonates the heart

O – resonates naval and solar plexus

Ou- resonates the lower abdomen

U - resonates the pelvis and lower body

### Consonants

N – resonates nose

M – resonates mouth area and can also be felt at the top of the head

### Open throat exercise

Make whimpering puppy sound

With a sense of aliveness in the eyes breathe in ah with a feeling of excitement and feel coolness on the back of your throat.

### Thymus tap

Tone Ah while tapping the thymus strengthens the immune system

Chant I Am \_\_\_\_\_

Massage heart and say “Even though I feel \_\_\_\_\_ I know I \_\_\_\_\_  
and I still love and accept myself.”

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