



## Singing Bowls - Separating Truth from Myth (Mitch Nur, PhD)

*"We have come to an age where it is very hard to know which is truth and which is deceit"*

Bangambiki Habyarimana

When we survey the sound instruments used in today's Sound Therapy practices or sacred sound programs no one instrument has overwhelming myth associated with them as the Himalayan Singing Bowls. What I am primarily focused on here, is what are they 'actually'. Sure, many of us in the Sound Therapy community have experienced them with profound awareness. They have become a very popular instrument in the therapeutic art of Sound for many.

My journey into the world of Singing Bowls began in 1973 long before the term 'sound healing' became popular, and probably before many of you reading this were born. At that time, there was only about a half a dozen westerners involved with Singing Bowls, the most notable being Frank Perry of the UK. But I do not want to leave out the contributions in the early years of Nancy Hennings, Henry Wolff, Karma Moffatt, and Dr. Alain Presenser in bringing awareness about them.

I have now spent over 4 decades exploring them, including living in Nepal and running field studies on the ground in the Himalayas. I know or have at least met, nearly everyone involved in the 'trade' of Singing Bowls in Nepal, and some in India as well. The range of this exploration includes hundreds of interviews with the monastic community, watching them being made, witnessing healing rituals using them by shamans and Bönpo medical Lamas, surveying collections both Eastern and Western, and more. I think it would be 'fair' to say I've done some true work in this area.

With all do respect to everyone involved, from people playing them, selling them, using them in a Sound Therapy practice, teaching about them, etc. I want to offer some of my thoughts on what they are, and are not, from my research. They are not made from a sacred 7 planetary alloy which proliferates the internet and some books. This information seems to have arisen originally out of a treatise written by Olympiodorus an Egyptian, written in Greek. Who by the way, never travelled to the Himalayas that we know of, nor does he mention 'anything' about Tibet or Asia at all in his writings. The 7 metals (as well as the 7 flowers, the 7 perfumes, etc) is something tossed about in Mid-eastern alchemy circles (and appears in other European alchemy writings), also unrelated to Asia, that has become part of the 'story'. One only needs to reference '*De Re Metallica*' by Georgius Agricola (1556AD) to understand how this information proliferated early thoughts regarding planetary/metal relationships in the West. Singing Bowls are bronze, 98-99% bronze with up to 14 trace elements making up that other 1-2%. I know this from numerous metallurgical analysis's and from watching them add the raw material to the 'ghuli pot' in the Himalayas firsthand. The process that is used today is more refined than say a few hundred years ago. Copper and Tin were in a unrefined form (containing many trace minerals) in the past, and the Himalayas contain at least 3 forms of Copper, in which one is far more resonant than the others. It is known amongst academics that have studied this, and is confirmed in at least 2 Tibetan texts, that drinking cups, plates, and cooking pots made from a metal alloy similar to what a Singing Bowl is made of, has certain medical properties and 'metaphysical potential.' I remember a short interview I conducted with Ter Ellingson, PhD professor of Music, Adjunct Professor of Comparative Religion and South Asian Studies at the University of Washington over twenty years ago. He was conducting field research in Nepal at around the same time I was in the early 1970's. He recalls seeing Singing Bowls being used in the early beer (chang) stalls in Kathmandu, but never for anything else. I remember thinking that the esteemed professor sees them as an interesting beer stein. But there are hundreds of different types and styles of them, used by the Himalayan cultures even today. I've seen them being used in medicine, astrology, divination, and in rare cases within the Zogchen school for meditation. Many of the uses you see for them in the West, is simply western in design and not eastern at all. My research suggests that they originated around the Himalayas, and quite possibly in the Zagros





Mountains (a theory I am now exploring). Evidence suggests that the metal-smiths of the northern Kunlun mountains (Kham) could have been involved in the early production as well. Keep in mind that 3 things are very important in their production outside of expertise - raw material. You need access to Copper, Tin, and wood to make charcoal for the furnace. Just for the record, Tibet has very little Tin reserves. The Tibetan Bönpo scholar Samten G. Karmay in conversation with me, agrees that the bowls did not originate in Tibet, and most likely in around Assam. Near Assam, to the east and north, was a Kingdom known as Jang. In early historical texts this area was known as the Land of Women, and in Scythian history, they once battled an entire army composed of women in armor. So we know that there was an advanced metal culture in this area of the world. But the *primary* area for Singing Bowls is Nepal (India is second) and the surrounding Himalayan area historically.

I want to point out, that the culture of the Singing Bowls stretches from Afghanistan to Burma primarily, but Vietnam has a type of Singing Bowl, and small groups of metal making communities exist in Ladakh, Kashmir, the Kushan Valley in Iran for example. Bowls similar to the Singing Bowl exist in China, Korea, and Japan, and Singing Bowls have been unearthed in archeological digs in Cambodia and Vietnam. Today when you visit Nepal, they are everywhere and everyone claims to be involved in some way with them, even monasteries are selling them and claiming some form of connection to them. You visit UNESCO cultural sites and find 'experts' claiming that they are from a singing bowl lineage or they were trained in Tibet. This is all just nonsense, a selling tactic in a very poor country, it's just business. But finding authentic sources (which do exist) versus dubious sources (overwhelming) in Nepal can be quite challenging for newcomers.

The 'stories' about Singing Bowls are too numerous to count, with 'possibly' maybe 1% having some semblance of truth to it. The authentic stories as well as the 'folktales' are far more interesting and entertaining than a lot of the fiction that permeates the web, including the pseudoscience. Westerners are the most guilty, but the Nepalese do nothing to refute these fictional accounts because they have families to feed. In the early 1970's I visited over 100 monasteries in Nepal (living for a time at 3,867 meters at a Nyingma Gumpa near Mt. Everest) and found no Singing Bowls, there was not one shop selling them in Kathmandu at that time, today there's probably 1,000 shops selling them throughout the Kathmandu Valley. Over the past decade, economic issues in Nepal has made it difficult to import raw material's, henceforth the majority of Singing Bowls found in the Nepalese marketplace today, are made in India and brought to Nepal.

This is a subject that I could talk about for days, and there are so many aspects to them that are of great interest to the Sound Therapy community. But this nonsense about them being Tibetan, or made of some secret alloy of 7 planets, monks chanting as they are made, or each hammer mark represents 108 recited mantras; whale bowls, dolphin bowls, moon bowls, lotus bowls, water bowls, void bowls, mani bowls, etc., is purely western in design (to *sell* them or *explain* them, the Nepalese have now adopted these words) stretching from the pretentious to falsification to deception. You can either be part of this information cycle or not. But I really believe that people want to be more focused on truth than myth.

In summary, a Singing Bowl is made from Bronze, and is technically a bell because there is 'less' internal movement in the metal in the middle, rather than the edge; so in theory they are a standing bell. Singing bowls however, find a general use as a resting Gong in Temples throughout Asia. They did not solely originate in Tibet, and evidence suggests very few were actually made in Tibet; so a Tibetan Singing Bowl only denotes a name, and not a country of origination. Their use as a sound therapy tool originated in the West, which has been adopted in the Himalayan regions in order to sell them to uninformed buyers. Did the Himalayan region use them for other purposes than tableware? Research and personal observation in numerous field studies in Nepal conducted over 4 decades, found many uses in the areas of divination, astrology, medicine rituals and application, ceremonies by shamans, Nagpa priests, and a small number of Lamas within the Bön and Nyingma traditions. They were not made in monasteries by monks or Lamas, but by metal-smiths in the





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'blacksmith' castes of the Himalayas. Inscriptions found on Singing Bowls, are not mantras, but generally a family name in most cases. Are they useful in Sound Therapy, yes in many cases and more so by people trained, and educated in Music or Sound Therapy.

The only book that I will recommend on this subject is *Himalayan Sound Revelations* by Frank Perry

For additional reference see: page 240 in *Dreamworld Tibet: Western Illusions* by Martin Brauen  
For additional insight refer to: *Tibet Chic: Myth, Marketing, Spirituality and Politics in Musical Representations of Tibet in the United States* by Darinda Congdon

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