

My Embodied Voice Practice

By Jim Cartwright

Framework and Context

I have been engaging in some form of daily vocal self-care practice for more than 20 years. By this, I mean taking care of my voice itself and engaging in vocal meditation as a means of taking care of myself psychologically and spiritually. By psychologically, I mean tending to my emotional well being, including working with the impact of my thoughts on my emotions. By spiritually, I mean feeling connected to something greater than myself and drawing strength from this connection rather than believing in or following any particular religion.

This is a hybrid practice that integrates vocal hygiene with a variety of mindfulness practices. Its central integration consists of harnessing the power of intention with optimal care of the voice. It is an organic practice that is always in a state of gradual evolution. Sometimes, the practice stays the same for years. At other times, it can change significantly within six months. This is my practice as I do it now, but it is like a plant, growing and evolving in its own time.

In sharing my practice, I hope that you find value in it for yourself and will be inspired to incorporate aspects of it into your own self-care toolkit. While parts of it can be used when working with people with vocal pathologies, this practice is designed to maintain a healthy voice. If you have chronic difficulty with the quality of your voice, there are many things to look into with a qualified professional(e.g., might you have vocal nodules? do you have excess muscle tension, especially around in the areas of your throat and jaw? etc.), which are not addressed in this context, nor are the basics of vocal hygiene(e.g., staying hydrated, refraining from screaming, etc.).

This practice is potentially beneficial for anyone who is drawn to it, but it was designed for speech paths, teachers, public speakers, singers, and others who use their voices a lot in their daily lives. It's also beneficial to be aware of how our voices interact with technology. I've noticed that talking with a slightly increased volume over zoom and needing to use a more staccato style of speaking when using voice typing and voice recognition software puts extra stress on my voice.

I do this practice in conjunction with other self-care practices, especially my daily dance practice, and encourage each person to create their own self-care toolkit via exploring many self-care practices and developing their own synthesis of what works best for them at this moment.

It is optimal to do this practice while standing up, with an aligned spine, as if there is a chord attached to the crown of your head with your chin slightly tucked and your neck relaxed. This gives us the full support of the body's musculature, which is not available to us while we are sitting down. It is also a flexible and portable practice. It can be done on the go while walking etc. I often do it while taking my morning shower. If time is short, it can be done in parts or in its entirety. When I'm busy, I sometimes do part of it in the morning and finish it on my lunch break.

This is a cross-disciplinary practice that draws on many of my different interests, including the fields of speech therapy, singing pedagogy, mindfulness, somatics, and various branches of science, including Newtonian science(the medical model) and quantum physics. Speech paths who work with voice clients will notice that some of my practices may be part of their treatment repertoire. For example, humming and lip trills are often part of Semi-Occluded Vocal Tract(SOVT) therapies, intending to improve the conditions inside the throat for optimal vocal fold vibration(neither too strained nor too breathy). This is analogous to doing stretches in a pool so that there is less impact and stress on your muscles, and they are less likely to fatigue. Likewise, focusing on the buzz that accompanies the "m" sound and humming to achieve balanced oral-nasal resonance is often part of resonant voice therapy. Practicing "yawn-sigh" is a common technique to help relax and open the muscles of the throat. You, the reader, do not need to be familiar with voice therapy to follow along with the practices I do.

One of the most inspirational aspects of quantum physics for me is that it debunks the myth of objectivity that is often present when only adhering to the medical model. Quantum physics acknowledges the impact of the observer on what is being observed. When we draw upon the observer to watch our inner worlds, we draw upon our inner witness to become more self-aware. When we are more self-aware and take care of our emotional well being, we are in a better place to be fully present for the other people in our lives, including people who receive any

professional services we may offer. I believe that what we observe in other people has as much to do with our own level of awareness as it does with them.

I don't believe in one-size-fits-all self-care practices. Silent meditation may be helpful to many people but not work for you. Less common self-care practices may not be the right fit for most people but might be the perfect fit for you. Through cultivating our meta-emotional awareness and somatic awareness regarding how we feel in our bodies, we can observe to what extent different self-care practices benefit us emotionally and physically. For this reason, I encourage you to take what is useful to you from my practices and let go of whatever doesn't resonate with you. For me, it is helpful to anchor my mindfulness practices in the body and the voice. My mind is a time traveler and gets distracted easily. But, my body and my voice have an easier time staying in the present moment. Focusing on them allows my mind to be more present too.

Even though I can't study my brain waves, I've researched the impact of mindfulness practices on our brain waves and autonomic nervous system. One of my intentions in doing vocal meditation is to get into an alpha brain wave state. When we are in a beta wave state(15-30 Hz), we are in an alert state. At the upper end of that, we are in a high alert, fight, flight, or freeze survival response, which puts a lot of stress on our bodies. At the lower end of beta, we are still very alert and not particularly relaxed. These brain waves are associated with the analytical mind, often necessary while working but not restorative.

The alpha wave state(9-14Hz) is a place of relaxation and restoration and the location of intuitive insight. I often have access to insights regarding the best things to do with the people who participate in my speech therapy sessions and the best ways to move forward in my life while I am in this state of mind. I cannot access these same insights while I am effortfully trying to figure out how to proceed, which I associate with a beta-wave state.

There are other brain wave states, including theta(4-8Hz-deep relaxation) and delta(1-3Hz-deep sleep). It may be that I sometimes go into a theta state with this practice. There are times beyond my daily practices when I know I need to completely stop efforting and let myself deeply relax by taking long hot Epsom salt baths, getting a massage, etc. which I assume involves getting into the theta brain wave state. Silvia Nakkach,

with whom I've studied several times over the years, often focuses on immersive, extended vocal meditation practices that may well guide participants into a theta state. Her school is Vox Mundi and her website is voxmundiproject.com. But, the most common use of this vocal practice for me is to invite a "bridge consciousness state," which I associate with alpha waves. It is relatively simple to move from this relaxed state into a "work" state. It takes the stressful edge off the workday and allows me to function in a more relaxed way.

Regarding the autonomic nervous system, which regulates our internal processes(blood pressure, breathing rate, etc.), I use this practice to live more in my parasympathetic nervous system than in my sympathetic nervous system. We always need both of them, and they are often engaged at the same time. The sympathetic nervous system is associated with preparing us for our fight, flight, and freeze responses. Unfortunately, we often get into this state only by the way we are thinking and the amount of work we feel we need to do when no life-threatening danger is present. This is stressful and drains our energy. The parasympathetic nervous system inhibits us from overworking and returns us to a state of calm. Vocal meditation is one way I encourage myself to shift the balance towards being more in the parasympathetic nervous system. In this state, our muscles and lungs are more relaxed and pliant. Full, calm, deep belly breaths are the starting point for my practice.

There are some elements of the practice, in particular the initial breathing practice, as well as the "ah" practice, that I integrate in moments throughout my day. For example, I often do the breathing practice for a minute or two between speech therapy sessions with clients. Also, when I practice active listening with struggling people, I often internally do the "ah" practice, inviting myself to be a conduit for unconditional love, while staying present with them in their struggles.

The Embodied Voice Practice Overview

Practice 1: Heart-Centered Deep Belly Breathing

Practice 2: Encouraging Forward Placement of the Voice: Chanting

Seed-Syllable OM

Practice 3: Grounded Presence Soothing Humming

Practice 4: Elongated Vowel Practice with Gentle Entry Point(Soft Glottal

Attack)

Practice 5: Invoking Inner-Presence of Revered Being

Practice 6: Creating Your Inner Shield

Practice 7: Chanting Brahma: Setting a Positive Intention for Your Day

Practice 8: Ah Practice

Practice 9: Waking up the Whole Range(pitch slides)

Practice 10: Yawn Sigh

Practice 11: Lip Trills

Practice 12: Traditional Mantras and Chants

Practice 13:Composed Prayer Songs

Practice 14: Facial, Jaw, and Laryngeal Massage

Practice 1: Heart-Centered Deep Belly Breathing

- a) Rub your hands together until your palms are warm and place them over your heart
- b) Inhale through the nose to warm the air and hold.
- c) While holding, become aware of what you are thinking and what you are feeling. Practice acceptance/unconditional love for any emotions and thoughts that are present.
- d) Relax your jaw and shoulders and exhale through your mouth making the sound of “h.”
- e) At the bottom of the exhale, while producing the sound “shh,” contract abdominal muscles(and all lower torso muscles, including butt) as if making a fist until you run out of air and release. Upon release, notice that there is a slight expansion in the abdominal area that sets you up for deep abdominal breathing.
- f) Repeat a few times.

Practice 2: Encouraging Forward Placement of the Voice: Chanting

Seed-Syllable OM

- a) Chant om(as in the word home) a few times. Begin with the back vowel [o] and move the voice forward into the bilabial nasal [m]. The intention is to use this as a facilitative context to open and relax the throat/release tension in the throat area and to encourage a forward-directed movement of the voice/forward oral-nasal resonance.
- b) Intention: Om is a seed syllable used in many chanting traditions. In Tibetan Buddhism, chanting Om is associated with “the throat chakra,” and creating/cultivating an awareness of space and allowing a feeling of wholeness/completeness to be present at the moment. These intentions resonate with me as I have a tendency to get overwhelmed and feel that I have too much to do in too little time, and I tend to tether my sense of self-worth to what I am able to accomplish. So, I use these intentions to counteract my default negative tendencies.

Practice 3: Grounded Presence Soothing Humming

- a) Having used the “om” as a facilitative context, hum while focusing on moving the voice forward/forward resonance. You will likely feel a slight buzzing sensation in the nose and lips.
- b) Hum gently to yourself using a limited vocal range. This is a self-soothing hum reminiscent of a lullaby.
- c) Intention combined with visualization: Grounding. While humming, focus on the soles of your feet and imagine that you are growing roots from the bottom of your feet. They travel down through any human-made structures, through the different levels of planet earth, and into the heartbeat in the center of the earth, the source of unconditional love and acceptance. Imagine the energy from the center of the earth traveling back up through your roots, into your feet, up through your legs, and into your belly. Continue humming while rubbing your belly.

Practice 4: Elongated Vowel Practice with Gentle Entry Point(Soft Glottal Attack)

a)Chant a series of elongated vowels, focusing on a different part of your body with each distinct vowel. Right before chanting each vowel, produce the sound of [h]. This [h] encourages a “gentle entry point”(soft glottal attack) vs. a hard glottal attack. This chanted vowel series is adapted from a practice of chanting vowels associated with chakras. If you prefer a different world view, each chakra is associated with a gland in the endocrine system(e.g., the sixth chakra is the pineal gland, etc.). For our purposes, we can look at the chakras symbolically and simply focus on different parts of the body that we can directly perceive and touch. Vocally, both the gentle entry point and the elongated vowels are easy, restorative sounds that help to warm up the voice and maintain healthy vocal folds.

b) Intention: Being fully present in our bodies, rather than hyper-focusing on our intellects at the expense of whole-body awareness.

1- OO- as in boot + “h” = who-” root chakra”

2- O as in joke + “h” = ho-below abdomen

3- Aw as in jaw + “h” = haw-belly

4- Ah as in father + “h” = hah-heart(connecting with arms and hands)

5- A as in day + “h” = hay-throat

6 -Ai as in sigh + “h”= high-forehead. Note: This is the only one that is a diphthong(a + i) rather than a pure vowel.

7 -Ee as in free + “h” = he-above top of the head. Note: This sound is traditionally seen as being above and beyond the physical body and connected with the energy body around the body. We can see this as connecting with our own sense of personal space/personal boundaries as we are never bodies in isolation but rather bodies in relation to other bodies.

Note: As the sound “he” automatically brings up associations with the word “he,” you may want to adapt your practice and replace it with “she,” “ze,” or “they.”

Practice 5: Invoking Inner-Presence of Revered Being

- a) Chant while visualizing revered inner beings. In my case, it's an "inner deity" (a character I invented) who symbolizes healing and who takes three different forms: male, female, and non-binary. I imagine communing with this being while resting in a heart-shaped pool with warm water and chanting. For a different person, the revered being might be Jesus, a goddess, a lotus flower, or an ancestor/admired loved one who has passed on. With this practice, you are invoking/inviting this being to come into your awareness and focusing on their positive qualities.
- b) My chant: Om heswa, om shewa, om theyswa

Practice 6: Creating Your Inner Shield

- a) Chant while visualizing a protective shield around you. In my case, my shield symbol consists of "lucero eggs" (eggs of light that drop from the sky. Some of them enter my body as time-release anti-stress capsules, but one surrounds my body with a shield of light which forms my personal shield).
- b) My chant: lucero eggs, lucero egg(x2 or more)
- c) Note: If you are inclined to visual art, you may want to draw and decorate your own shield. This does not need to be paired with chanting, but can be a symbol you call upon when dealing with challenging people and feeling stressed/tired during the day, with the idea of it helping you not take on too much of the stress from the world around you.

Practice 7: Chanting Brahma

- a) Chant Brahma- once again, focusing on moving the sound forward, the "r" in "br" directs us to the back of the mouth, followed by the "ah-m-ah" which moves the sound forward, ending with an open vocal track for "ah."
- b) Context: I do this practice in the morning, and the intention of this chant is to welcome the new day. Within Hindu cosmology, Brahma is the beginning, Vishu is the middle, and Shanti is the end. In addition to welcoming the day, I focus on changes that I want to bring into my life and use the chant to energize these possibilities.

Practice 8: Ah Practice

- a) Use the same “ah”(minus the initial [h]) associated with the heart from the elongated vowel practice, chant “ah” while focusing on sending sound from the heart, representing loving kindness and gratitude. Send the “ah” forward, backward, to each side, above, below, and within.
- b) Intention: Sending loving-kindness to all people, including yourself. The “ah” sound is associated with the heart in many different traditions. One adaptation to this practice that I use throughout the day is visualizing sending heart energy to the person in front of me without making the sound, seeing myself as a conduit through which the energy can move rather than as the source of the energy. I do this while practicing compassionate listening to anyone in my life who is struggling.

Practice 9: Waking up the Whole Range(pitch slides)

- a) Wake up your entire vocal range by doing pitch slides from the bottom to the top of your range, followed by top to bottom. I do the upward slides with the sound of “who” and the downward slides with the sound of “wah.” Do not worry if there are gaps in your range or a bit of raspiness, but be careful not to push. It can be helpful to move your arms up and down as your pitch goes up and down.

Practice 10: Yawn Sigh

- a) Practice the yawn-sigh to open and relax your voice after you have practiced expanding your range.

Practice 11: Lip Trills

- a) Practice lip trills to move the sound forward, relax your facial muscles, and coordinate your breathing with vocalizing.
- b) Optional: do lip trills with the range of do-mi-so-mi-do. Do lip trills with a one-octave range going from do-do and with pitch slides. This practice is often initially challenging so I encourage you to start with easy lip thrills.

Practice 12: Chanting Traditional Mantras

- a) Choose a traditional mantra or mantras to add to your practice here. This can give you the benefit of connecting to millions of people all over the world and through many time periods, who have chanted these mantras for peace and the well being of all people. If chanting in other languages is not appealing to you, you can chant mantras in English.
- b) My most frequently chanted mantras at this point-
- 1) to Tara, the Tibetan Buddhist goddess of compassion
Om tare, too tare, too-re, swaha
 - 2) The Buddhist Heart Sutra- invoking the bodhisattva practice of working to eliminate suffering.
Gate, Gate, Paragate, Parasamgate, Bodhi Svaha
 - 3) Buddhist and Hindu Sanskrit chant- “seeing the jewel(mani) in the lotus(padme) as a metaphor for “ seeing eternity in a grain of sand(William Blake),” invoking a sense of universal oneness beyond space, time and individuality and experiencing this eternal oneness in all things in the present tense.
Om Mani Padme Hum
 - 4) Goddess Chant- to reflect the cycle of life and death on Mother Earth
We all come from the goddess
And to her we shall return
Like a drop of rain flowing to the ocean
Corn and grain, corn and grain
All that falls shall rise again
Hoof and horn, hoof and horn
All that dies shall be reborn
- c) Note: There are two different, interconnected, definitions of the word mantra: 1) a sound, syllable, word, or phrase chanted repeatedly in meditation to aid in concentration
2) a statement repeated frequently. This does not need to be sung. It can be spoken or written(e.g. Instead of “om”-I am complete as I am in this very moment)

Practice 13: Composing Prayer Songs

- a) Compose your own prayer songs or chants, to sing at the end of your practice, which reflect your values and aspirations. These are generally less repetitive and longer than mantras. They involve a request/petition to a higher power and /or an honoring/gratitude practice.
- b) My prayer songs: Deeper Wisdom, Inner Flame, and Swansong. Note: The swansong(= a song composed to be sung at the moment of death) that I composed is connected to another aspect of my self-care/spiritual practice, which is Impermanence Practice. I gather poems and songs about impermanence, to remind me of how brief life is, to be grateful for the moment, and keep the tasks and stresses that daily life brings into perspective.

Practice 14: Facial, Jaw, and Laryngeal Massage

- a) Massage your face and jaw with downward strokes. Do not force your jaw open. Just let it hang down with your tongue resting at the bottom of your lower teeth.
- b) Use your thumb tips to massage the underside of your chin.
- c) With your jaw still open and relaxed, press on the following acupressure points. 1) where the top of the ear meets the skull, 2) at the nub of the ear, 3) where the bottom of the earlobe attaches to the skull, 4) below the ear, at the corner where the jaw bone begins.
- d) At your tempo-mandibular joint-about an inch in front of your ear nubs, massage with your thumbs in a circular motion.
- e) With your thumb and index fingers of one hand in a horseshoe shape, massage your throat(laryngeal) area.
- f) Return to massaging your face and jaw with gentle downward strokes.

Note: You may want to make gentle releasing sounds with your voice while giving yourself this mini-massage.

After this, repeat practice # 1: Heart-Centered Deep Belly Breathing, closing the circle of your practice and returning to the silence from which all your sounding arose.

Resources

Books

Boone, Daniel R. *Is Your Voice Telling on You?: How to Find and Use Your Natural Voice*. Singular Publishing Group, 1991

Devore, Kate, and Cookman, Starr. *The Voice Book: Caring For, Protecting and Improving Your Voice*. Chicago Review Press, 2009

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Rinpoche, Tenzin Wangyal. *Tibetan Sound Healing*. Sounds True, 2006

DVD

Vocal Hygiene: Maintaining a Sound Voice, Plural Publishing Inc. 2015.
Presenters LeBorgne, Wendy, Gottliebson, Renee and Weinrich, Barbara