SHAKING MEDICINE

WE KNOW IT’S GOOD TO MEDITATE,
BUT WE’VE OVERLOOKED THE
HEALING POWER OF ECSTATIC
SHAKING . . . UNTIL NOW.

By Bradford Keeney

In November of 1881, a Squaxin Indian logger from Puget Sound named John Slocum became sick and soon was pronounced dead. As he lay covered with sheets, friends proceeded to conduct a wake and wait for his wooden coffin to arrive. To everyone’s astonishment, he revived and began to describe an encounter he’d had with an angel. The angel told Slocum that God was going to send a new kind of medicine to the Indian people, which would enable them not only to heal others, but to heal themselves without a shaman or a doctor.

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About a year later, John Stocum became sick again. This time, his wife, Mary, was overcome with despair. When she ran outside to pray and refresh her face with creek water, she felt something enter her from above and flow inside her body. “It felt hot,” she recalled, and her body began to tremble and shake. When she ran back into the house, she spontaneously touched her brother and he started shaking. When she shook bending over her husband, his health improved the next day. That was when “it came to his mind that this was the new medicine” and that “this medicine was the shake.”

From that moment, the Indian Shakers recognized and valued the spiritual inspiration that may trigger shaking and lead to a healing encounter. The Indian Shakers were not the only culture to make this discovery. Shaking bodies and vibrating touch have been known throughout the world as powerful forms of healing expression. Yet the value of trembling, vibrating, quaking, and shaking as a medicine for the body, mind, and soul has been lost in recent times, particularly among the more literate and technologically developed cultures.

However, no culture can completely eradicate a behavior or social practice. Prohibition merely forces things underground, where they continue to thrive. When many churches and healing traditions all banned spirited “out-of-control” expression, it moved into the musical arenas of blues, rock, rave, and techno, not to mention Burning Man festivals throughout the world and the sanctified gospel traditions of the African-American church. The shaking has never stopped, but today it usually takes place without benefit of the collective wisdom.

Shaking is the key to a wild place, the unconscious wilderness—a place that the poet Gary Snyder describes as “elegantly self-disciplined, self-regulating”—a place without a management plan. This place of wilderness is home to the shamans, Quakers, Gnostics, Taoists, yogins, anachists, American Indians, acheki, Buddhists, Shakers, Suifs, Teilhard de Chardin Catholics, biologists, Druids, Zen Buddhists, and Tibetans—trades argued by mystics that are greater than our capacity to understand.

Using a flashlight, time exposure, and creative lighting techniques, Keeneley illustrates the light that many people see during peak arousal.

In the years since that first experience, I have shaken with shamans and indigenous doctors all over the world, from the Caribbean Shakers of St. Vincent to the Guarani Indians of the Amazon to leaders of the Japanese healing tradition of Seiki Jutsu. I have learned that there is no right way to shake or to learn how to bring shaking medicine into your life. I have also learned that cultures throughout the world have made their own hypotheses and created their own names for what they assume is a force behind the shake. They generally propose that there is a universal life force that we can tap into, and that its energy brings forth the shaking and all the other energetic outcomes.

In China the name for this hypothesized energy is chi or qi. It is called ki in Japan, n’om among the Kalahari Bushmen, tampiony moorop among some Aboriginal Australians, prana in India, yin by Jewish Kabbalists, Holy Spirit by Christians, jinaka by Suifs, manitu by the Ojibways, and ha in Hawaii. Among many indigenous peoples it is simply referred to as “medicine.”

The name and hypothesis don’t matter. We can agree that there is such a thing as an excited body. We can observe that the aroused body is accompanied by ecstatic experience that can renew and transform our lives. I invite you to shake. At first it may seem erotic and unnatural. But when you experience the shaking in its natural form, you will feel that it was always a part of you, an old friend finally lost—the leadership of your own body.

May~June 2007

BETTY ROBINSON

I t wasn’t long ago that the practices of yoga, medita- tion, and acupuncture were relatively unknown. But today the idea that relaxation and stillness being forth healing is a paradigm that Herbert Benson, M.D., of Harvard Medical School named the relaxation response. The complement to relaxation is arousal, or the arousal response. And heightened arousal—whether through wild dancing, spontaneous jumping, or bodily shaking—may be as valuable a healing and transformative practice as sitting quietly in a lotus position. (See box, below.) The most powerful form of healing may come from a complete cycle—from ecstatic expression to deep quiet.

OVERCOMING THE ECSTASY TABOOS

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Your Brain in the Shake

Sc h o lar s of consciousness such as Roland Fischer, formerly professor of experimental psychiatry at the College of Medicine, Ohio State University, have examined the relationship between hyper- aroused ecstasy and hypo-aroused meditation. Fischer’s work in the seventies proposed that the further one moves in either hyper- or hypo-arousal, the closer it is to transforma- tional experience one gets, with both ends pointing the same: an experience described as the oneness or coherent unity of the universe, the experience of the totality and duality.

Recently, University of Pennsylvania neuroscientist Andrew Newberg, M.D., who has studied brain changes in Buddhist meditators and praying nuns, pointed his scan- ner at five Pentecostal women talking in tongues (also known as glossolalia)—no small task since it required in- serting a catheter into the arms of singing, dancing, shak- ing people. The result: We Believe What We Believe (Free Press, 2006), may be the first of its kind on how an aroused brain functions. Newberg decided to try it because there may be as many people who speak in tongues as people who engage in intensive meditation and prayer, and because glossolalia involves speech, the language areas of the brain can be studied.

What he found were some fundamental differences and one marked similarity between those having a quiet spiri- tual experience and those having an arousal response. Unlike the meditators and prayers, when the Pentecostal women spoke in tongues, there was a decrease in activity in the frontal lobes (body, thought, and language control centers), suggesting that the language was being gener- ated in a different way or from outside the normal speech processing centers. Also, their orientation centers had increased activity—increasing their sense of self, rather than oneness. But this may have been because of the limitations of the experiment. Newberg posits that if the Pentecostals had spoken in tongues for the same amount of time that the nuns prayed and the Buddhists meditated, they too might have had an experience of oneness.

The core of the interesting similarity between the prayers and meditators and glossolalia practitioners was that in a resting state, members of all three groups had a thalamic asymmetry (more activity in one thalamus than in the other—there are two thalami). Newberg, who has evaluated thousands of patients, has never seen this anomaly in the brain. He has learned that there is no right way to shake or to learn how to bring shaking medicine into your life. I have also learned that cultures throughout the world have made their own hypotheses and created their own names for what they assume is a force behind the shake. They generally propose that there is a universal life force that we can tap into, and that its energy brings forth the shaking and all the other energetic outcomes.

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Sharing the Shake

My shaking began more than 36 years ago with a mystical experi- ence that led me to kindred spirits — detailed in Bushman Shaman Awakening the Spirit through Ecstatic Dance (Destiny Books, 2003): “I looked along the horizon and saw a distant gathering of Bushmen. We stopped the track and I turned toward them. I went up to the oldest men, recognizing those I had seen in my dream. Our arms reached out for one another and we embraced as if it was a homecoming. Immediately the old man, whose name was Mantag, the chief of the village, began to shake. I shook with him. Without words we were already communicating; we were meeting through our bodies, expressing through vibrations what I had traveled across the globe to ‘discuss.’” As we shook, some of the women in the community gathered around us with their children and began singing and clapping their hands to make a vibrant rhythm. That was my first experience of shaking with a Bushman. . . . My guide, Tivle, later explained, ‘For shamans, the dance helps them feel the power that causes the shaking. For me, I feel my hands getting very hot when I touch others in the dance. When the people sing loudly and I dance, the power comes into my feet. It is the power from the music and the seriousness of the occasion that make me very hot. It comes into my head and I feel it as a kind of steam that makes my head feel larger. A light then comes over the dance. My body also seems to become lighter in weight and I feel like I am floating.”

EXPERIENCING NEW MEDICINE

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Bradford Keene, Ph.D., is director of the Bushman (San) Nom Nkasi Ethno- graphic Project, Institute of Religion and Health, Texas Medical Center, Houston and honorary senior research fellow at the Rock Art Research Institute, University of Witwatersrand, South Africa. See Shaking Medicine.com.
SHAKING IN THE WORLD’S SPIRITUAL TRADITIONS

THE KALAHARI BUSHMAN SHAMANS

Members of the world’s oldest living culture, the Bushman shamans — men and women — are probably descendants of the original custodians of shaking medicine. Their dance is based upon a disciplined way of arousing and orchestrating ecstatic body experience. Present-day Bushman shamans are painfully aware that the world is in a dangerous crisis. They have asked me to spread this message and their medicine. (For more on my first experience with the Bushmen, see “Dancing with the Kalahari Bushmen,” SEP, June 2003.)

QUAKERS AND SHAKERS

George Fox healed people with the touch of his hands, and his preaching brought forth shaking and quaking in the congregations. Often beaten, stoned, and run out of town, he was imprisoned eight times. Fox’s followers, originally called Children of the Light, were later called Quakers because of their violent trembling when they worshipped.

The Shakers, arguably an offshoot of the Quakers, began when Ann Lee came from Manchester, England, to America in 1774. According to the first written record, in 1777, God put into the prophet’s mind the words, “Henceforth shall my people dance.” At the end of the eighteenth century, Cooper City was on the verge of becoming a model Shaker community when the state of New York prohibited the construction of new buildings. The great Shaker center of New Lebanon, New York, was destroyed in 1910. In the early 1920s, the Shakers withdrew from the movements of the time. The Shaker movement has persisted in the upper New York state for over 200 years.

EUROPEAN ECSTASY

In the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth centuries, the orthodox Catholic Church was faced with the growing heresies, which sometimes resulted in periods of religious ferment. In the period between 1870 and 1914, the Church was occupied with the problem of the eclesiasticism of the “Shakers” in New England and New York. The Shakers, who were considered to be heretical by the Church, were the first organized religious group to develop a system of ecstatic experience.

As the Shakers, the Quakers, and the Shaker movement developed, they both contributed to the development of the concept of ecstasy. Ecstasy is a religious state of altered consciousness in which the individual is usually in a trance-like state and experiences a strong sense of personal liberation and a new spiritual understanding. In the Shaker movement, this experience was the focus of their religious practices and was considered to be a direct communication with God.

In the Quaker movement, the experience of ecstasy was also important, but it was more focused on the individual’s personal relationship with God and their role in the world. Ecstasy was seen as a way of experiencing God’s presence and was used as a means of expressing personal devotion and understanding.

The Shaker movement, on the other hand, saw ecstasy as a way of experiencing God’s presence and as a way of expressing personal devotion and understanding. Ecstasy was used as a way of communicating with God and of experiencing a greater sense of personal liberation and spiritual understanding.

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TENAKA INDIAN.shakers

The Tenaka Shakers were a Native American religious group that developed in the eastern United States. The group was founded in the early 1800s in the Tenake Creek area of western North Carolina, and it eventually spread to other parts of the country.

The Tenaka Shakers believed in the power of the Holy Spirit and the need for personal salvation. They practiced a form of ecstatic worship that involved singing, dancing, and speaking in tongues. The group was known for its healing practices and its emphasis on community and cooperation.

The Tenaka Shakers were active until the mid-twentieth century, and their influence can still be seen in the work of other Native American religious groups. Today, the Tenaka Shakers are remembered as one of the early American Indian groups to develop a form of ecstatic worship that was both religious and communal in nature.