

A photograph of a person with long hair, seen from the side, playing a black grand piano in a rustic room. The room has a thatched roof with exposed wooden beams. Two windows with orange curtains are in the background, and a lamp with a patterned shade sits on a table between them. The lighting is warm and golden, creating a cozy atmosphere. The piano is the central focus, and the person's hands are visible on the keys.

# SHAKING MEDICINE

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

By BRADFORD KEENEY

**I**n 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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Photography by CHIP SIMONS

About a year later, John Slocum 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 all but lost in recent times, particularly among the more literate and technologically developed cultures.

**I**t wasn't long ago that the practices of yoga, meditation, and acupuncture were relatively unknown. But today the idea that relaxation and stillness bring 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 TABOO

We have been liberated to do many things with our bodies, from ingesting chemical substances, legal and illegal, to stimulating our erotic capacities through endless forms and scenarios. What still remains off limits is the shake. Most of us have been taught never to appear out of control.

## YOUR BRAIN IN THE SHAKE

**S**cholars of consciousness such as Roland Fischer, formerly professor of experimental psychiatry at the College of Medicine, Ohio State University, have been aware of the relation 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 to transformational experience one gets, with both end points the same: an experience described as the oneness or coherent unity of the universe, and an absence of distinction and duality.

Recently, University of Pennsylvania neuroscientist Andrew Newberg, M.D., who has studied brain changes in Buddhist meditators and praying nuns, pointed his scanner at five Pentecostal women talking in tongues (also known as glossolalia) — no small task since it required inserting a catheter into the arms of singing, dancing, shaking people. The experiment, detailed in *Why 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 spiritual 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 generated 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 length of time that the nuns prayed and the Buddhists meditated, they too might have had an experience of oneness.

The one really 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 any group of healthy people, and he categorizes it as an attribute of people who have intense spiritual experiences — although he doesn't know if they are born with the asymmetry or if the asymmetry is a result of years of spiritual practice.

The differences between meditators and prayers on one hand and hyper-aroused glossolalia practitioners on the other must be seen in the context of the latter study's difficulties — it is easier to gauge the right time to scan a meditating person than a talking, gyrating person . . . which may explain why hyper-arousal research has been so neglected. But Newberg isn't fazed. His next project: a possible study of whirling Sufi dancers.

BETSY ROBINSON



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

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 but 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, yoginis, anarchists, American Indians, alchemists, Bushmen, Shakers, Sufis, Teilhard de Chardin Catholics, biologists, Druids, Zen Buddhists, and Tibetans — traditions awed by mysteries that are greater than our capacity to understand.

### SHARING THE SHAKE

My shaking began more than 36 years ago with a mystical experience that led me to kindred spirits — detailed in *Bushman Shaman: Awakening the Spirit through Ecstatic Dance* (Destiny Books, 2005):

“I looked along the horizon and saw a distant gathering of Bushmen. We stopped the truck and I ran 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 were 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, Twele, 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

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, *tumpinyeri moorooop* among some aboriginal Australians, *prana* in India, *yesod* by Jewish Kabbalists, Holy Spirit by Christians, *baraka* by Sufis, *manitou* by the Ojibway, 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 exotic and unnatural. But when you experience the shake in its natural form, you will feel that it was always a part of you, an old friend formerly lost — the leadership of your own body. **SEH**

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# THAT SHAKING FEELING AND HOW TO GET THERE



Shaking medicine is different from any spiritual dancing, aerobics, trance dancing, or bodywork I have experienced or witnessed. It is not the ecstatic dancing of Gabrielle Roth or the organized whirling of the Sufis. You don't consciously create the shake. The shake shakes you. Once you get going, you may find that some of your automatic movements seem familiar, but here they serve to bring forth the shaking medicine. In this spirited expression, the shake and the vibration are more important than the dance.

Here are some possible experiences:

- Highly charged excitement
- Simultaneous deep relaxation and heightened arousal
- Vibrating, prickling, or tingling sensations; sensations of energy or electricity-like currents circulating in the body
- Intense heat or cold
- Muscle twitches and involuntary body movements: jerking, tremors, quaking, and shaking
- Desire to move into an unusual body posture
- Awareness of an inner force moving inside you or an inner voice that guides
- Feeling of being high (“drunk from the shake”)
- Intensified sexual desire
- Increased heartbeat
- Spontaneous expression such as laughing or weeping
- Improvised vocalizations
- Hearing inner sounds like bees buzzing, drumming, moving

## SHAKE IT UP! WORKSHOPS

Deepen your shake. Experience the power of the group shake. Join Bradford Keeney for a workshop of music, movement, and joy at Miriam's Well in Saugerties, New York, July 13–15; and The Crossings in Austin, Texas, July 20–22. No experience necessary. Wear comfortable clothes.

More venues are possible. Check [SpiritualityHealth.com/workshops](http://SpiritualityHealth.com/workshops) for the latest scheduling updates.

For details and registration, call 845-246-5805, or visit [SpiritualityHealth.com/workshops](http://SpiritualityHealth.com/workshops), or workshop coordinator [MiriamsWell.org](http://MiriamsWell.org).

- water or wind, roaring, whooshing, thunder, ringing, or music
- Altered states of consciousness: expanded awareness, trance, or mystical experience
- Blissful feelings in the head, particularly the crown area
- Pervasive and indescribable bliss
- Intensified feelings of love, peace, and compassion
- Visionary and out-of-body experiences and imagined flight
- Belief that you are acquiring a healing power
- Stimulation of the desire for creative expression
- Deepened understanding of life; enlightenment, conversion, or transcendent experiences

Knowing that what you are experiencing is “normal” can make it more acceptable and pleasurable.

## A GOOD PATH TO THE SHAKE

Shaking in the company of others is one of the most powerful experiences I know. Your shaking can be catalyzed and deepened by the presence of others. You can join me and others for that experience (see box, left), or you can begin on your own:

- 1 | Focus on good feelings — preferably love, compassion, and kindness — and stay connected to them. It doesn't matter what words or phrases, if any, come to mind.
- 2 | Turn on some spirited rhythmic music and start wiggling and moving.
- 3 | It doesn't matter whether your eyes are open, half-closed, or closed. Do whatever feels natural.
- 4 | Activate your muscles, wiggling and moving them from head to toe.
- 5 | Gradually increase the rate of breathing until you are breathing rapidly.
- 6 | Assume an active attitude toward becoming excitable. Encourage yourself to tremble, shake, and quake.
- 7 | Continue shaking for as long as you wish. This is not an indulgence.
- 8 | At the end of the exercise, let your body do what it wants — lie down, sit, walk, or whatever feels right.
- 9 | Do this when you desire, even once a day, but at least once a week.

B.K.

BETH WALD

# 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,” *S&H*, 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 congregation. 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, seeking a place to worship free from persecution. Shakerism subsequently became an American movement centered in New England and New York. Anne Lee was frequently imprisoned for dancing and shouting on the Sabbath.

## JEWISH AND ISLAMIC ECSTASY

Individual and social outbursts of ecstatic expression and shaking were historically known in Europe and other parts of the world. Enthusiastic dancing was part of the ancient Hebrew tradition, and even King David “danced before the Lord with all his might.” [2 Samuel 6:14]

The prophet Muhammad had convulsions, during which he received the visions and revelations. These in turn led to the religion of Islam.

(Left to right) Shaking medicine and joy in the Kalahari Desert of Botswana, the Caribbean island of St. Vincent, the village of Djokhoe in Namibia, and Motown.



KALAHARI: IZAK BARNARD; ST. VINCENT: KERN L. NICKERSON; NAMIBIA: PADDY M. HILL; MOTOWN: CBS PHOTO ARCHIVE/CONTRIBUTOR

## EUROPEAN ECSTASY

In the thirteen-hundreds, hundreds, if not thousands, started dancing in the streets, in churches, and in their homes, claiming to honor St. John. Religious and political authorities demanded that exorcism be used to stop the disease.

In the fifteenth century, the wild dancing broke out again, this time called St. Vitus' dance. The trembling bodies were again diagnosed by the clergy and sent to the church of St. Vitus at Rotestein for healing prayers to calm them down.

There were ecstasies called the French Prophets. There were also the Jumpers, known for singing a song over and over as a means to bring on ecstatic experience.

## NATIVE AMERICAN INDIAN SHAKERS OF THE PACIFIC NORTHWEST

The Indian Shakers emerged in the eighteen-eighties. Government agents had banned all traditional forms of Indian doctoring. With Shakerism, the Indians were able to move some of the ecstatic, visionary, and shamanic aspects of their old ways into an acceptable form.

The Ghost Dance was an ecstatic circle dance that spread throughout Indian country, causing government agents to demand that troops quell the “pernicious system of religion.”

## SHAMANIC SHAKING

Foreign cultures more familiar with shaking, such as the Bushman, Zulu, and other African traditions, recognize that a shamanic initiate will shake uncontrollably for great lengths of time. Among the Zulu, the beginner is taken to a senior *sangoma* or medicine person, who will watch over him or her for as long as it takes for the shaking to become familiar and manageable.

## CARIBBEAN SHAKERS

The Spiritual Baptists of St. Vincent practice a shamanic blend of Christianity and African spiritual traditions. In 1912, an ordinance was passed “to render illegal the practice of ‘Shakerism’ as indulged in the colony of St. Vincent,” saying that “a certain ignorant section of the inhabitants” was gathering for practices “which tend to exercise a pernicious and demoralizing effect upon said inhabitants.” The ordinance was repealed in 1965.

## THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN CHURCH

All shaking and ecstatic expression is driven and enhanced by spirited music. When the father of gospel music, Thomas A. Dorsey, first introduced it, he was kicked out of many African-American churches. People called it the devil's music. By the sixties and seventies, secular musicians returned to churches and merged energized forms of church music into their own offerings, which became rhythm and blues and soul. Wilson Pickett, Sam Cooke, Billy Preston, Dionne Warwick, and Aretha Franklin, to mention a few, put the church sound into the world, as Dorsey had once put the worldly sound into the church. **S&H**