

Meditating on the power of music



Music can help with meditation by tapping into emotions as well as helping with concentration, reports CLODAGH MULVEY,

CRASHING WAVES subsiding into still pools of water, the tide lapping at the shore and mother whales singing birthing songs, are just some of the sounds you might hear emanating from the CD corner in many a health food store.

These so-called “meditation music” recordings are often for sale next to angel cards and self-help books and are considered by many to be part of the “new-age” approach to healing – and therefore devoid of merit, depth or value.

And yet many traditional bodies in Ireland use music to help enter a meditative state. It is not only considered valid, but it is even thought to be a psychological trigger for relaxation that is seated in the depths of the human subconscious.

Brother Cyprian Love, a Benedictine monk at Glenstal Abbey in Co Limerick, says that Gregorian chanting is used at the Abbey to assist them in meditation on the life of Jesus Christ.

But, he says, music is not necessary for meditation – it is merely a tool to help you access what he calls a “naïve state of bliss”.

“The emotional life of music can be deeply conducive to a meditative state. But it is meditation through music. Music is an object of delight, but is not the object.”

The Catholic church speaks of a “special relationship” between Gregorian chant and the liturgy, he explains.

This points to the traditional connection between music and meditation.

“But there’s more to it than that,” he says. Gregorian chant is done through a rhythmic form of breathing akin to yogic breathing, he explains.

“The chant is not metric, it has a more fluid rhythm. It is more like the rhythm of waves crashing on a beach. “This allows for deep emotional resonances to music, going back to childhood – even to the sonic tones experienced by babies in the womb,” he says.

Along with providing this soothing and calming maternal echo, music is also “profoundly associated with our experience of time – as it orders time in regular beats and patterns,” says Brother Love.

So Gregorian chant lends itself to meditation as it provides “a method of dealing with time”. These ideas of mother and time evoke an emotional response of relaxation and “all music goes back to that naïve state of bliss,” he says.

John Doherty, a meditation teacher and owner of The Beehive meditation school, in Co Dublin, agrees that relaxation is key to accessing a meditative state and says he uses music to provide an “anchor” during the process.

“We need both the left brain and the right brain for meditation: the left brain is good at focusing, the right brain at relaxing,” he says.

“Combined, focus and relaxation brings people into a meditative state.”

But sometimes, people relax so much they fall asleep and fall out of meditation, he says.

So music performs a dual function: it helps people to relax while providing an aural focus, that helps people stay with the process and stop thinking.

Doherty says people ranging from mothers to business people come to his school looking for a way to “stop the incessant thinking”.

Doherty’s meditation practice focuses on opening the “head, heart and gut” and finding a “connection to everything, to source”.

Having practised Buddhism for a number of years, Doherty says he has experienced first-hand how sounds affect the body’s chakras.

“Sanskrit is a musical language, designed to have an impact on the body’s system musically,” he says.

“A lot of the music I use opens the heart, but different musical semantics affect people’s systems. Music provides an emotional connection for people and can also be associated with cognitive memories. But there is the other side of it – music is vibrational and sounds resonate with the head, heart or gut,” he explains.

“When these three parts are integrated and working together, you can begin to experience the subtler part of yourself. You can actually feel that you’re alive,” he says.

“There is a whole science to the way music is able to ground someone or open them up. It’s written and designed that way. Towards the end of my meditation classes, I turn down the music and there is a profound silence,” he says.

“The music provides a great counterpart to silence. The music represents the group’s busy thoughts.”

Brother Séamus Byrne of Wicklow town monastic community, The Servants of Love, composes Celtic music and says his music is written as a meditation.

Having now released 40 CDs of meditation music over many years, he says it is the “primitive sound” of Celtic music which first resonated with him and his spirituality.

“I compose a style of music that I think is relaxing, which evokes nature sounds such as water, rain and waves and which is powerful and healing,” says Byrne.

“A lot of people find it difficult to meditate because of busy minds,” he says. “But beautiful and interesting music engages you at the level of beauty and sets your mind free, as it does not lead you into thoughts.”

Byrne says that his meditation music works by attracting the attention – with the sounds of the Irish box flute or the apache spirit flute – out of the thinking.

Next, it takes you on a spiritual journey – particularly through the use of nature’s sounds – via relaxation and, finally, it brings about a state of peace.

“However, there is a difference between meditation and relaxation,” he says. “But you can’t meditate unless you’re relaxed.”

BRINGING STILLNESS TO CHILDREN

The Sanctuary holistic centre in Stoneybatter, Dublin, has been running a programme for students over the past five years, which uses meditation techniques in order to bring children to “a moment of stillness”.

Niamh Bruce says the “Sanctuary for School” programmes are aimed mainly at secondary schools.

Over the course of 10 weeks, they encourage students to participate in gardening, music, story-telling and sensory journeys, taking wisdom from various traditions.

Bruce says that students and children are “constantly bombarded by their environment”: with texting, magazines, iPods and television shows being a daily reality.

“Therefore relaxation and being able to focus are very important for them to find a moment’s stillness.”

Students at the Sanctuary are introduced to world music – including Aboriginal, African, Native American and Eastern – and, with guidance from Brother Richard Hendrick of the

Dublin Gospel Choir, they learn to focus on the breath and enjoy the sounds of different tones, gongs and even Buddhist singing bowls.

“Aside from accessing a moment’s stillness, students have also experienced improved communication skills, concentration and have been able to become more collaborative and to open up,” says Bruce.

www.thebeehive.ie

www.brotherseamus.com

www.glenstal.org

www.sanctuary.ie