

Handheld frame drums are among the oldest known musical instruments, dating back to prehistoric times. Drums have throughout the ages been used for ritual, prophecy and celebration. And, through the process of rhythmic entrainment, drums have the power to heal both individual and collective bodies. The key to the use of the drum as an instrument of healing is through repetition - monotony does not represent a lack of skill or imagination, but serves a therapeutic purpose, much as mantra, breath and chant repetition are used in Eastern traditions.

Teachings published by West African Master drummers of the Dagara tribe in Burkina Faso, the Ga tribe in Ghana, and the Minianka tribe in Mali describe this rhythmic entrainment process: Musicians who are trained also as healers engage in deep listening and attunement to identify and mirror the rhythms most likely to serve the patient. What emerges is a rhythmic dialogue between the sounds produced and the responses of the person being treated, unique to that individual even though symptoms may reflect a common diagnosis. Once the right pattern of sounds has been established, musicians will sustain that rhythm as long as necessary – hours, or days even – until the patient is restored to inner balance. Examples of cases treated by drummers include hysteria, epilepsy, physical trauma, emotional imbalances and psychological disorders. Western neurologist Dr. Oliver Sacks is also publishing studies that support the use of drums for lessening the effects of dementia and other neurological disorders, and establishing drum circles in nursing homes.

Here in our own back yard, Kokomon and Aesha Clotey have founded the Attitudinal Healing Connection in Oakland, CA, and developed the practice of “Mindful Drumming” to promote programs that heal communities from the effects of violence and racism. This specific form of drumming is not about jamming and improvisational rhythms (which are great fun!) but the intentional use of rhythmic repetition in unison, as a portal to the transformation of consciousness. Kokomon teaches that this is “a meditation practice, not a music practice” – and at the same time, it is not a journey out of the body into trance and away from this space/time, but a journey into deep and focused presence, uniting hearts and hands in service of a collective intention.

As a group begins to drum together in unison, a rhythmic container is created that facilitates a deep sense of connection and belonging. EVERYONE can participate, with no musical background or special training. Body, mind and spirit begin to attune to the heart, and a space is created in which it is then safe to address difficult emotions or experiences with words – and conversation takes on a greater depth and quality. And, something also shifts at a place beyond words, as the body *remembers* a state of rhythmic harmony with its surroundings.

To facilitate a Mindful Drumming practice, arrange participants to sit in a circle, so all can see one another. Instruct everyone about the focus of this experience – which is not on drumming expertise, but the power and spirit of community and the practice of deep listening. Invite participants to pay close attention to the hands of the leader and those next to and across from them, and to listen *with their hands*. Some additional helpful instructions before beginning:

- 1) Rhythms will change at intervals of 3-5 minutes.
- 2) It is okay to stop and rest at any time one is tired or anxious, with hands lightly on the surface of the drum until ready to rejoin the group. The rhythm of the others will resonate through all drumheads, allowing connection even if someone is not actively playing.
- 3) There is no talking once the drumming begins and the group enters a collective meditation.

The leader then guides the group through a series of basic rhythmic patterns, each one repeated for a minimum of three minutes and typically at a tempo ranging from 60-120 bpm. The rhythmic changes will keep people alert and tuned into each other, and not zoned out into trance. Sample rhythms are provided in Kokomon's "Mindful Drumming" book, or may also be chosen or created by the facilitator's own style or understanding of the group (See References and Appendix).

A practice of 30 minutes of mindful drumming may be used to set the stage for a longer session of dialogue and group work; a practice of 45-60 minutes can stand alone as a group meditation or healing practice. To end the exercise, the facilitator will model the final rhythmic pattern fading gradually quieter to gentle fingertips until all stop, with hands resting on drums. Allow time and space for the rhythm to be felt internally, still moving in the stillness. Thank the drums, offering a prayer of gratitude for this time in community. Traditional Ga words used as a closing blessing are: "*Tswa, tswa, omanyaba*." May we be blessed! May all our wishes be granted and brought to fruition. Response: "*Hiao*." May it be so.

I can attest that this practice is powerful, and effective. After one experience of Kokomon's teachings one time at his center in Oakland and using his book as a reference, I facilitated my first Mindful Drumming practice with a staff that was struggling with trust and communication issues. The most challenging issue was transporting the collection of my own and borrowed frame and djembe drums. This practice marked a turning point in the group dynamics, and we were able to move into a different energetic space of commitment and understanding that in fact required little further talk and processing. The challenge for many of us in this culture – aside from the logistics of assembling the instruments - is overcoming our fear of the drum, or some internalized sense that we are not authorized or empowered to use this instrument in the ancient ways. One member of my staff exercise chose not to use a drum, but to use his hands and legs to make the rhythms... and he reported afterwards that this did not negatively impact his experience of a significant opening, and shift in perspective – a testament that the rhythm itself is the instrument of healing.

*Drum! If your heart beats,
Drum! For the breath of life,
Drum! For those yet to be born,
Drum! For happiness,
Drum! For world peace,
Drum!
~Kokomon Clotney*

REFERENCES

Clotey, Kokomon. *Mindful Drumming: Ancient Wisdom for Unleashing the Human Spirit and Building Community*. Oakland, CA: Sankofa Publishing, 2003

Diallo, Yaya and MitchellHall. *The Healing Drum: African Wisdom Teachings*. Rochester, VT: Destiny Books, 1998

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

Christensen, Toby. <http://www.healingdrummer.com/free5-element-mini-course/>

Hart, Mickey, with Jay Stevens. *Drumming at the Edge of Magic: A Journey into the Spirit of Percussion*. New York, NY: Harper Collins, 1990.

Redmond, Layne. *When the Drummers Were Women: A Spiritual History of Rhythm*. New York, NY: Three Rivers Publishing, 1997.

Sacks, Dr. Oliver. <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/body/Musical-Minds.html>

APPENDIX: SAMPLE MINDFUL DRUMMING PATTERNS:

4/4 (“the heartbeat”) GUN GUN GUN GUN

6/8 GUN go do / GUN rest rest

4/4 GUN-GUN GUN-GUN GUN GUN-GUN / GUN-GUN GUN rest rest

6/8 GUN go-do go-do / GUN rest clap

4/4 GUN go GUN rest / GUN go GUN rest / GUN go GUN GUN / GUN go GUN rest

4/4 GUN-GUN rest GUN-GUN rest / GUN-GUN go GUN-GUN rest]

4/4 (EARTH) GUN-GUN rest-go do-GUN rest-rest

4/4 (SAMBA) GUN rest go-do rest 3x then >> GUN GUN go-do rest

4/4 GUN-xxx GUN-xxx GUN-xxx GUN - (flam) x = gentle grace notes