



Mindfulness Through Indian Classical Music

By Indrani Mukherjee

Mindfulness is a state in which one is concentrating fully on the present and immersed in feelings, thoughts and bodily sensations of the moment. In other words, when we practice mindfulness our thoughts tune in to the present moment, rather than obsessing about the past or being apprehensive about the future.

During mindfulness one can meditate and delve deep into one's inner self. It is a place where we can reset and relax our minds; it is about being in the present. While practicing mindfulness, one is in a state of concentrated relaxation, watching dispassionately and without bias; current emotions, sensations, sights, smells and sounds swirl around without giving in to them or judging them. Mindfulness practice can literally transform one's entire world from the inside out. In other words, the more mindful you are the happier you are. You may discover incredible, wonderful and surprising things: such as everything you have been searching for has been within you all along ... feelings of fulfilment, peace and wholeness.

Mindfulness is frequently used in certain kinds of therapy. It has many positive benefits, including lowering stress levels, reducing harmful thinking, and protecting against depression and anxiety. Mindfulness can also be used to treat Autism Spectrum Disorders and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity disorders in children. A common way to practice mindfulness is through meditation. Meditation alone can become difficult without having a central unifying force helping and accelerating one to be in the present.

Research on the effects of Indian Classical Music in mindfulness and music therapy have been found to be beneficial in treating the symptoms of Autism and ADHD in children. An extension of this research has also found this type of mindfulness produces benefits in people suffering from dementia. Before going into the benefits of this music form, it is important to understand its origins and structure.

India, a small subcontinent deeply enriched with culture, flourishes in the arts. From traditional classical music to modern pop music, India has it all. Indian classical music, with its ancient roots, is similar to western improvisational jazz. Many people have heard about Indian classical musicians such as Ravi Shankar and Bhimsen Joshi, but for a better understanding, let us explore the origins of Indian Classical Music.

The origins of Indian classical music can be found in the Vedas. These are compositions dating back to 1500–1200 BC, according to most scholars. Veda is a collection of poems, and in the ancient Indian language of Sanskrit, Veda means "Knowledge." The texts constitute the oldest layer of Sanskrit literature. The Veda sages (monks) developed these texts after intense meditation, which have been carefully preserved since ancient times.

Indian Classical music divides the 7 basic notes of the octave in ascending tonal order: Sa, Re, Ga, Ma, Pa, Dha, Ni, similar to Western music's Do, Re, Mi, Fa, So, La, Ti. The Indian classical musician performs a raga, which is a combination of rhythms, beats and melody. Each performance is based melodically on ragas

(colors), and rhythmically on talas (beats). Raga and tala are the two foundational elements of Indian classical music. Different types of ragas and talas are created for different times of day, moods and seasons. Each raga has its own different approach, which can create an atmosphere of enjoyment for the listener. Raga and tala are means of evoking certain feelings in the audience. Ragas can transform an agitated mind to a peaceful and relaxed mind in the present moment, which is mindfulness. That creates an increased sense of wellbeing.

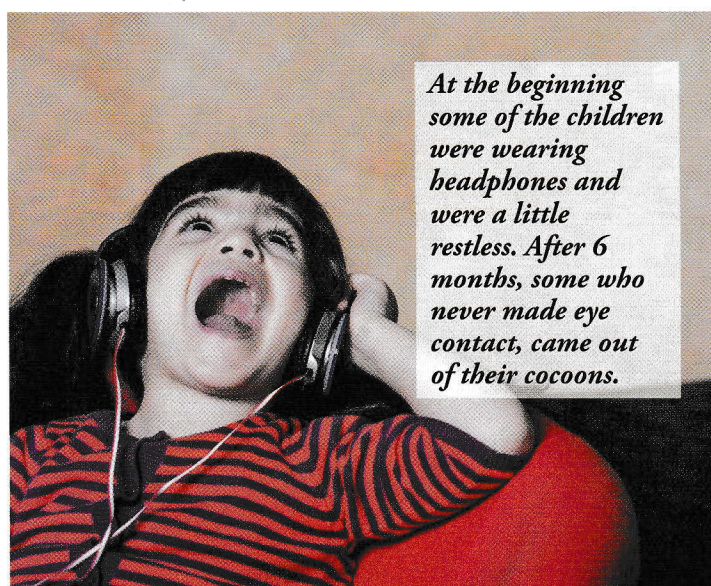
I first discovered the potential of Indian Classical Music for treating behavioral conditions through its impact on my mother, who was suffering from depression and early stages of dementia after my father passed away. She was feeling anxious, depressed and was having difficulty sleeping. My mother was also prone to sudden bouts of tears. I started singing a certain set of ragas and observed my mother calming down, relaxing and falling asleep. These ragas, when recorded and played to my mother over the succeeding months, induced permanent benefits such as reduction in depression and anxiety, and reduction in the episodes of crying.

I have been working with autistic children for the past several years. I studied the effect of different types of ragas and intra raga elements, such as slow and different levels of rapid-motion tempo ragas. I discovered that ragas, such as they are performed in live concerts, need to be modified to be beneficial for mindfulness. Modifications include speed, beats, and rhythm patterns; hence the mindfulness raga becomes entirely different from the ragas performed in live concerts.

As mentioned previously, Indian ragas are assigned to specific times of the day (or night) and to specific seasons. I experimented with different ragas and started seeing interesting effects. For example, in a group session with autistic children I performed an evening raga (sunset); but instead of performing it in the evening, I performed it close to noon for about half an hour with a slow-motion tempo. The intent was to induce calm and quietness, which was the essence of that raga. At the beginning some of the children were wearing headphones and were a little restless and pretended not to be interested. As the performance went on, I observed that the children who were initially restless, all become very relaxed. Some of them started to lie down and even fell asleep.

After 2 months of these sessions, I observed that this group of children was completely relaxed, engaged, and attentive, and none of them came into the sessions wearing headphones anymore. After 6 months, during evening raga performances, I observed the children interacting with the music and beats. Some of the children in the sessions, who were withdrawn and never made eye contact, came out of their cocoons and have now gone on to enroll in colleges and are even performing live music.

My research into exploring the effects of this mindfulness on dementia, depression and stress is also showing beneficial effects. The type of ragas and rhythms used though, are different from those discussed in the context of treating autism symptoms.



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The benefits of this type of mindfulness are realized over time. Best results are obtained through practicing mindfulness daily and being committed. The trick is to start with practicing this form of mindfulness for short periods of time and then increasing the duration. ☺

Indrani Mukherjee is an accomplished Indian Classical Music vocalist who performs internationally. She has a background in Economics (MSc) and is also a successful interior designer. She has been conducting research on the benefits of Indian Classical Music for mindfulness and autism. Contact her at mindful@panchajanyaom.com or 860.877.9463.

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