

A woman with long dark hair, wearing a white sari with a gold border and a patterned blouse, is seated and playing singing bowls. She is holding a mallet with a purple head and a wooden handle, striking one of the bowls. Several other singing bowls are arranged in a row in front of her. The background is a textured, light blue wall.

# THE MASTERY BOOK OF HIMALAYAN SINGING BOWLS

A Musical, Spiritual and  
Healing Perspective

by Emile de Leon

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Emile de Leon performs live with the singing bowls at various Tibetan festivals, meditation and yoga centers, has made guest appearances on television and radio shows as a speaker to discuss the Tibetan bowls and headlined a benefit concert for the Tibetan Nuns Project. Emile also conducts workshops in wellness centers across the East Coast regarding the spiritual and healing aspects of Tibetan singing bowls.

Emile de Leon is available for public and private concert performances and group meditations, commercial studio recordings and music licensing for television and film as well as personal productions requiring the Tibetan singing bowls.

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## CHAPTER ONE: DIFFERENT KINDS OF BOWLS

Beginning the search for a good sounding Tibetan singing bowl may be a little confusing at first as many sizes, shapes and tonalities are available. For those just starting out on this journey it is good to have some knowledge at hand for a wise choice to be made that will continue to satisfy in the years to come.

Before acquiring your singing bowl, it sometimes is good for a decision to be made early on as to what the bowl's intended use will be, i.e. its function. Consider for a moment what size bowl might be best to perform that function well. Do you want the best bowl possible as in professional meditation and healing services or a less expensive beginner bowl? Do you wish to carry a smaller or larger bowl? Or perhaps own a set?



There are a wide range of sizes to choose from and these generally start at 3" in diameter at the smallest, up to 21" for the largest size.

The majority of bowls you most commonly will see will be in

the 4" to 6" diameter range. There will be higher and lower quality bowls within all of the available size categories. This is subjectively determined by the sound timbre as well as the fineness and overall construction and its physical condition.

Unfortunately, not all singing bowls are of stellar sound quality even if at a quick glance they may look beautiful to the eye. Sometimes a shiny new looking bowl won't play very well, while in contrast to that, an ancient dark one might amaze with its beautiful tones.

This happened to my friend while traveling in Nepal on his first trip there. In searching through hundreds of bowls he came to notice a very tiny dark bowl somewhat hidden in the pile. At first sight he was going to reject it, but just for curiosity's sake he decided to play the bowl, and surprise, it turned out to be one of the best he found on the whole trip.

A few years later the same thing happened to me. While on my first trip to Nepal and going through multitudes of bowls I came across a tiny, very dark one and it is now in my collection being a stellar sound performer. Sometimes when you search for bowls overseas they can be quite dirty from years of just sitting around so be sure to check them out carefully.

It is important to remember that the higher quality bowls are quantified by the tonal quality of the sound, and this is dependent upon two important things: the skill of the maker and the mixture of the metals. It is said that the more expensive and rare metals (gold and silver) and the more sophisticated alloys will produce the rich, full-bodied sounds which the singing bowls are famous for. In the case of lower quality bowls, they will produce a sound, but not with the beautiful, melodious long tones that the higher quality instruments do. Note that most of the lower quality bowls are made quickly for commercial purposes and not for their esoteric sound function. As a theoretical rule the higher quality bowls are said to use more elements and the lower quality ones simpler metallic combinations without the rarer elements. The real test for the best sonic qualities is realized though by carefully playing and listening to each bowl's unique sound in person.

A third lesser known determiner of sound quality is more subtle and revolves around the bowl's personal history and aura: How it was played and when, and in what circumstances. And even more importantly, for how long. The age of the bowl can be a

very important factor as sonic vibrations will change the bowl's timbre for the better over time.

There are no hard or set rules for the correct musical seasoning of a singing bowl. One of the most important factors for the best sound though is related to how the bowl was originally constructed and who did the pouring and hammering of the metals. An experienced craftsman with a great ear will always make the best bowls. The proportions of the metals are important too, but not as important as the actual craftsmanship. Metal smiths had their well kept family secrets, especially in relationship to temperature control, hammering and finer aspects of bowl construction that are not easily duplicated even if the elemental proportions are known. When asked if they can produce today the finest quality bowls as in ancient times, the invariable answer from contemporary bowl makers is no. The reason cited is that the secret knowledge to make the best grade antique bowls has been lost forever.

But I think there is hope yet for perhaps one intrepid individual to dedicate his life to the reacquisition of this lost knowledge. However, this will take a very unique person who is part musician, part metal smith, and part artist who is willing to ferret out this information gleaned from the great bowls already made and reconstruct them. I have seen this done in the Turkish cymbal world by one individual in Italy who did exactly this. No one thought it could be done, but after decades of searching, casting and hammering, it was accomplished. Cymbals are not so different from singing bowls in this regard.

Most of the bowls contain a large amount of copper and a lesser amount of tin. The tin is usually between ten percent to thirty percent of the mixture with copper comprising the rest unless there are other elements added. There are many myths here regarding elemental composition, but we can be relatively sure that most bowls are of a bronze mixture, which is the alloy of copper and tin. Sometimes there is trace silver as well and this adds brilliance to the sound. Iron in the form of meteorite was used as well as other elements such as gold in some bowls.

Many cymbals and gongs contain similar metallic proportions and the creation and development of these instruments took place largely in the Bronze Age. Some bronze instruments such as smaller finger cymbals stretch back seven thousand years in their development. There is much evidence though that mankind is

much older than previously thought and that his musical inventions may be older as well.

*There is always a striving for the best combination of elements and hammering for the perfect instrument and sound. Only a rare percentage make this grade.*

If a bowl is well made and with a good and balanced tone it will most likely only get better with age. On the other hand, if it started its life off with a poor construction and sound quality don't expect much improvement.

An aircraft engineer once explained it to me this way. When metallic substances vibrate over a long period of time, these vibrations transform the metal into a more malleable form. The internal molecular structure of the metal actually undergoes physical changes from what the original internal composition of the object was. This can be very good for metallic musical instruments such as singing bowls and cymbals because as the bowl is continually played and the metal vibrates, the instrument over the years becomes less stiff to play and much easier to tonally manage with a warmer sound that reflects these internal changes.

#### ANTIQUÉ vs. NEW

There is not much debate in the fact that the best quality antiques will always trump newly made bowls no matter how well they are constructed or how good they sound. However, it is also good to remember that some of the newer bowls can rise to excellence too and should not be discounted as a viable option for a good sound experience. Some of these modern bowls are in fact quite surprising how well they play, yet just like the antiques, only a small percentage of these will rise to the grade of A quality. As a rough estimate only about one to five percent of the antiques will sound excellent while about ten to twenty percent of the new bowls will sound really good. There is definitely a certain special something in the good antique bowls that is glaringly absent in the newer ones though. It could be the gold and silver, or the years of ageing, or the smelting and hammering, but you can definitely hear it in the warmth and tone of the older versus the newer. The best older bowls contain a

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