# Topics to Consider in Unit IX

- *What can be understood by "balance"? And – what role can music play in balancing the various areas of the human condition?*

- *What are some general areas in which music can be used to "heal"?*

- *In what manners can music and storytelling be combined to balance or heal both human and cultural imbalances? And – what are some ways in which Indian, Chinese, Korean, Japanese, and Indonesian cultures apply the ancient art of "balancing" through musical storytelling?*

- *In what manner does music and dance overlap in the Hindu history and religious practices? And – what can be understood by the "raag," "rasa," the "drone," or the symbolism of Hindu stories in the context of balancing?*

- *What is the role or status of the teacher in Indian culture?*

- *In what manner can the influence of "spirit" over reality be seen in Chinese art forms (of all variety)?*

- *How might we understand the diversity and complexity of Chinese evolution in the context of "Chinese music" or today's China?*

- *What are some of the important aspects of creating balance through the art of storytelling in Chinese "opera," Korean Pansori, Japanese Noh or Kabuki, and Indonesian Gamelan?*

- *How is sound and space different in the older genres of China, Korea, and Japan from that of Western music – or the modern music of these cultures?*

- *What are important considerations in understanding Korean and Japanese culture — and much of their modern music over the last century? And – what was the impact of the last centuries wars on "balance" in these cultures?*

- *In what manner do young Chinese, Japanese, or Indonesian musicians carry forward their ancestry and the art of balance while combining the voices and sounds of their generation? And – how might we understand this principle as relates to a natural understanding of the "cycle of life"?*

# UNIT IX

## Asia: Seeking Balance (and Healing) Through Music

*"Thus have I heard. Once the Blessed One was staying at Savatthi, in Jeta's Grove, Anathapindika's monastery. There he addressed the monks thus: 'Monks.' –*

*'Venerable sir,' they replied. The Blessed One said this:*

*"'Monks, suppose a cloth were clean and bright, and a dyer dipped it in some dye or other, whether blue or yellow or red or pink, it would take the dye well and be pure in colour. And why is that? Because the cloth was clean. So too, monks, when the mind is undefiled, a happy destination [in a future existence] may be expected.'*

*"He abides, having suffused with a mind of compassion…of sympathetic joy…of equanimity one direction … and so above, below, around and everywhere, and to all as to himself; he abides suffusing the entire universe with equanimity, with a mind grown great, lofty, boundless and free from enmity and ill will. He understands what exists, what is low, what is excellent, and what escape there is from this [whole] field of perception." Buddhism, Excerpts Vatthupama Sutta, The Simile of the Cloth 1-14*

When we think of the enormous geographic region known as "Asia," and its vast cultural diversity, the task of encapsulating Asian history and music into a single unit is imposing. Even conceptualizing "Chinese" or "Indian" culture or history as separate entities is attempting to understand large, culturally and geographically diverse regions with thousands of years of history interrelated to numerous other cultures. As with the similarly large continent of Africa, unless we are fortunate to have a professional or personal connection with someone from a region of Asia that will extend our contact indefinitely, we are left to seek a means of learning about cultures or their expressions (music) that might provide us an incentive (motivation) to continue contact over time. Although multicultural exchange, symbolism, religion, change or exchange over time, community, and virtually any topic discussed thus far could be the "frame" for a discussion of Asian cultures, we have chosen the topic of *healing*, or creating balance in all areas of human experience: physical, emotional, mentally, spiritual, and cultural.

At the height of today's media explosion and what some feel is an imposing surplus of information at times leading to a depersonalization of the human experience, breakdowns in family and community life, and desensitization to the beauty of the human experience, we may find ourselves seeking a better sense of **balance** in our lives. The *balance* required might include that of the *physical* (muscles, circulation, nervous system, etc.); *emotional* (a sense of stability or the conversion of sadness, anxiety, or anger to calmness or serenity); *mental* (calming what some Buddhists refer to as "monkey mind"—the overly active mind) in order to retain important information, displace the unimportant, (and know the difference between the two); *spiritual* (a combination of all elements with a heightened connection to a Higher Value or Power), and finally, *social, cultural or communal* balance (the activities, relationships, family, and community interactions that greatly affect our perceptions of balance in the prior three categories).

Pic. 9.1 *A replica of an ancient statue of Gautama Buddha, found in Sarnath, near Varanasi. In general, statues of Buddha are used to remind practitioners to practice "right living."* Photo: Public Domain, courtesy DhJ.

We can see this yearning for balance in virtually all of the world's art, but especially in that Asian music, art, or storytelling over the past three to four millennia. Why is it we see so pervasively the images of nature and the emphasis on being harmonious (in balance) with nature in the music and dance of nearly all Asian cultures? Why is creating an internal balance within oneself so emphasized in the ancient stories of Asian cultures? Despite the impact of modern media and technology, are the ancient principles still practiced or present? If not, why not? If so, how? These are all questions worthy of consideration.

Finding, creating, and maintaining a sense of balance in life between one's history and one's present, and between oneself and the world around one, is an essential feature of the majority of Asian philosophies and historical practices (see below). It is, therefore, just as critical to the appreciation of the culture's music.

**Important Influences in Asian Music and Art**

- The long history of Hinduism and Buddhism in much of Asia.
- The focus of these religions on creating a sense of balance with oneself, with nature, and with the world around us.
- The long and ancient history of storytelling as a means of passing the philosophies of these ancient religions (and teachings) through the generations.
- The emphasis on music and dance as an *encouraged,* if not primary, means by which stories have been passed through the centuries.

Before we begin exploring the music of Asia specifically, it is first important that we consider the manner in which music affects us physically, emotionally, mentally, and culturally. Because music is the ordering of vibrations, how these vibrations affect us, and how music is used to balance each of the areas of human experience and perception, is an important discussion by itself. A high percentage (if not all) of the music we choose to listen to is consciously or unconsciously selected according to its potential to bring us "balance" or fulfillment.

After a short discussion of music's "healing" power, we may better understand how the music of India, China, Korea, Japan, and Indonesia's cultures have for centuries focused on creating harmony and balance in the human experience. It is precisely in their stories and how they form and manipulate vibration that we will get a glimpse of the healing (balancing) power in music.

# Understanding the "Healing" (Balancing) Powers of Music

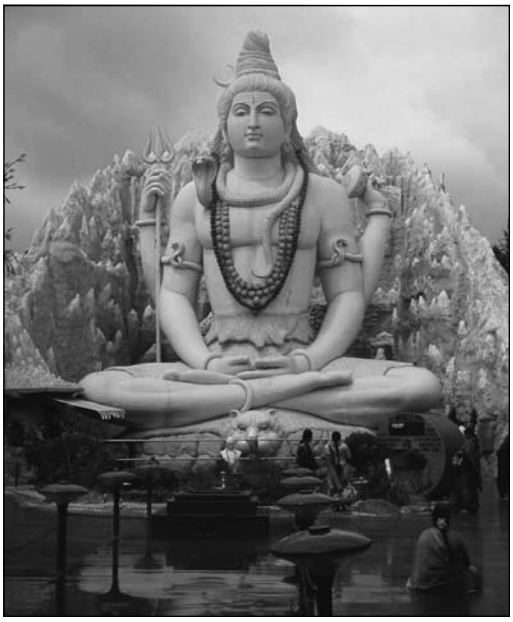
*"Do not be proud of wealth, kindred and youth;*
*Time takes away all these in a moment.*
*Leaving aside this entire (world) which is of the nature of an illusion,*
*and knowing the state of brahman,*[9.1] *enter into it."*
[Extracted from Bhajans to Lord Ganesha]

A majority of music we choose to listen to, we do so in order to create a *balance* or sense of equilibrium, at some level, with our current state, based upon learned preferences and aesthetics. Whether the CDs we choose to play while driving our cars, cleaning our houses, for our parties or special functions, or the concerts we attend, regardless of genre, style, or culture, music is more often than not a means of establishing human equilibrium. In what manner does music interact with our human senses and perceptions to calm the mind, increase energy, diminish anger or frustration, or incite us to dance or to move, possibly even to the point exhaustion or euphoria?

**Music** is the conscious ordering (or perception) of sounds (vibrations) as experienced, perceived, and understood by individuals and cultures according to their values. Because all sound is vibration, when we hear these vibrations in the context of life, they become a part of our memory, as do smells, sensations, and experiences. In time, we begin to construct a network of sound preferences through our associations and experiences.

Although these networks of preferences and bodies of sounds will change as influenced by our experiences and cultural exposures, the pattern of contact with sound and music and the ultimate process of selection or rejection is universally applicable within the human experience. Equally universal to an individual's selection or rejection of sound, organized and perceived as "music," are the following:

- All humans use music, in part, to enhance or induce human emotion. And all humans experience the same range of human emotions, although each culture determines the proper expression for both type and desired method of expressing the intensity of each emotion.
- All humans participate in various musical experiences from levels of extreme passivity to extreme physical/emotional/spiritual engagement. Generally, the greater the engagement in the musical experience, the deeper or more memorable the impact.
- Most musical expressions are created by converting some aspects of the human experience into ordered vibrations, according to the learned values and experiences of the musician. Each musical experience will impact one or more of the areas of human perception (physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, and cultural). Assuming the listener "likes" or chooses the experience, it can be assumed that the musical ordering (how the vibrations have been composed) will affect "balance" or "healing" in the widest sense for the listener. The range or combinations of human perception and the extent or intensity of balance derived from the musical experience is both universal (to human physiology) and culturally specific (to time, cultural aesthetic, and place).



Pic. 9.1A *Lord Shiva, part of the "Trimurti" (or Holy Trinity) of Hinduism, is a perfect example of balance with the attributes of being: the Creator, Preserver, Destroyer, hiding sins and providing blessings. This statue of Shiva meditating (in Bangalore, S. India) also demonstrates the principle of symmetry found in nearly all Hindu art.* Photo: Courtesy Deepak Gupta.

Music has a direct impact on us from a very early age. Before we are aware of life itself, we can sense vibrations or, in essence, hear music. We begin to learn patterns of sounds and to create associations. It's not at all uncommon for parents to sing or play a song for a fetus prior to birth and later to notice a distinct change in