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# Transpersonal Effects of Exposure to Shamanic Use of Khoomei (Tuvan Throat Singing): Preliminary Evaluations from Training Seminars

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## RESEARCH NOTE

# Transpersonal Effects of Exposure to Shamanic Use of Khoomei (Tuvan Throat Singing): Preliminary Evaluations from Training Seminars

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Khoomei is a Tuvan Siberian shamanic practice involving overtone throat singing. One hundred eighty-one Western participants completed questionnaires after attending Khoomei seminars, asking about the following: motivation of people to learn shamanic throat singing; self-perception at the levels of body, energy, and mind before-and-after the seminar; feelings and sensations from practicing throat singing; transpersonal experience during throat singing; experience of inner vibrations from listening to the singing; and general state and feelings after seminar. In general, most participants reported many benefits from attending the seminars, although a few reported mild negative effects (e.g., dizziness and sadness). Of particular interest are the many transpersonal experiences reported (e.g., freedom from body limits and extending mind limits).

**Keywords:** *shamanism, Tuvan throat singing, Khoomei, sygyt, kargyraa*

Shamanism (Kalweit, 1988; Kleinman, 1980; Rogers, 1982) is a collection of many indigenous beliefs and practices that serve as one progenitor of transpersonal psychology, and many linkages have been made between various shamanic practices and modern Western healing practices (e.g., hypnosis; Krippner & Friedman, 2009). However, there has been little empirical research on how shamanic practices are perceived, or of their effectiveness, when provided or taught to modern Western participants. In our research, we preliminarily explore the evaluations of a series of training seminars on the shamanic practice of overtone throat singing used for millennia in Tuva, Southern Siberia.

### **Background on Tuvan Shamanism**

Situated between Russia and Mongolia, the Republic of Tuva succeeded in preserving its shamanic tradition, even under the religious repression of the former Soviet regime. This was largely due to its physical isolation, and even today there are no railroad connections and only seasonal air connections with this remote part of the world. Traditionally since time immemorial, the only religion practiced in Tuva was its indigenous

shamanism, but Buddhism arrived in the 17th century. Owing to its non-violent nature, Buddhism did not destroy the local beliefs and practices but, rather, in many ways enhanced and merged with it in a type of syncretism. More recently, Christianity arrived in Tuva through immigration and is practiced by a minority Russian community, but it has only had a small effect on the local people to date.

Tuvan shamanic traditions remain quite strong, especially among the elders in the indigenous population, and are mainly animistic. In this tradition, worship focuses on nature spirits, including of local trees, springs, mountains, and many other aspects of the world. Tuvan shamans developed specific languages to communicate with these spirits. By imitating the sounds of nature and animals, Tuvans developed the art of throat singing, called *khoomei*. This spread into the whole of Tuvan culture, and became a part of a larger singing folklore tradition, as well as used for spiritual and healing purposes.

In musical terminology, khoomei is a drone (i.e., *bourdon*) polyphony: a stable low tone with a

melody on the top (Bessler, 1950). Overtones are created by singers changing the shape of their lips and resonant cavities of their mouths, larynxes, and pharynxes, as well by using the amplifying abilities of the sinuses of the skull. The resulting resonance creates one or more pitches above drone at the same time. In the cosmology of the ancient Turks, from whose roots stem the Tuvan culture, khoomei is seen as the sound equivalent of the sacred World Tree, a symbol common to many shamanic traditions; in this regard the dichotomy of drone and melody represent the lower, middle, and upper worlds of the universe, as reflected by this tree (Khaltava, 1991).

There are three main styles in khoomei throat singing, used both in folklore and shamanism, distinguished by the character of the sound and the method the sound is produced. The khoomei style itself is called by the Tuvans “the mother of throat singing,” because this has the same name as throat singing in general. It is performed by a singer in the middle register and used by shamans to make connections and offerings to the spirits of the Middle World in the shaman’s cosmology. The *sygyt* style is characterized by a clear overtone whistle above a constant middle tone; this highest style is used to communicate with the spirits of the Upper World. The *kargyraa* style is the most deep, bass style of singing, which can sound like a deep roar or a deep rasping wheeze; shamans use it to communicate and appeal to the spirits of the Lower World.

In shamanic practice, khoomei is a part of the *kamlanie* ritual, when shamans get into trance states through drum, voice, and dance. In these trance states, when used for healing, shamans supposedly can get direct knowledge about reasons for patients’ problems and diseases. At the same time, sounds of throat singing have a deep relaxing and trance inducing effect on patients, helping to release tensions in both their bodies and minds, while activating energy and inner resources necessary for self-healing and restoration. Possibly this also works in more subtle ways, such as through the physical effect of sound vibrations on the body, as speculated about how cell membranes might be influenced by sounds (e.g., creating subsequent harmonization of organs and physiological systems; Maman, 1997).

### Study

The traditional study of the khoomei in Tuva is acquired mainly through family and relatives, so practitioners learn the art in a natural way through

sounds imitated from childhood. Obviously it is very difficult for a Western student to study this art and enter its underlying worldview, which forms a natural matrix within the Tuvan culture. The first author of this article, Vladislav Matrenitsky, had the privilege to study khoomei and its usage in shamanism during a ten-year apprenticeship with the prominent Tuvan shaman and master of throat singing, Nikolay Oorzhak. As result, they have created the modern training system called Un-Hun (“The Sound of Sun” in the Tuvan language). Nicolay Oorzhak and Dr. Matrenitsky have presented this shamanic sound techniques in form of seminars since 2005 in more than twenty countries throughout Europe, Asia, and America. In addition to khoomei being an art, it is also amenable to scientific study, and the present paper is the first attempt of which we know to explore the effect of Westerners being exposed to this shamanic practice. Dr. Matrenitsky, as a medical doctor and biomedical researcher, is also interested in placing this shamanic practice when applied to healing within the context on modern Western science.

### Method

As part of his many seminars on khoomei, Dr. Matrenitsky has collected evaluations and other outcome data. Unfortunately, from a scientific perspective, these data were not collected in a completely systematic way, and some essential information is missing, such as demographic data on age and gender. Nevertheless, it represents a unique set of data collected in the field by a teacher of an authentic shamanic practice. The data presented here are a result of research at Un-Hun seminars from 2008 through 2009 in Sweden, Norway, Holland, Germany, Romania, Switzerland, and the US.

### Participants

One hundred eighty-one participants completed questionnaires after Un-Hun seminars. There is no information regarding rates of completion or, as mentioned, any demographic background data.

### Survey

Questions were completed on the following topics: motivation of people to learn the shamanic throat singing; general evaluation of self-perception on the levels of body, energy and mind before and after the seminar; feelings and sensations at time of practicing the throat singing; transpersonal experience at time of throat singing practice; experience of inner vibrations of participants from listening to shamanic singing; and general state and feelings after seminar.

## Analysis

Evaluation of the data was performed using STATISTICA 6.0 by calculating the difference between two proportions.

## Results

The motivations that drew most of the participants to these seminars involved seeking spiritual development, singing development, and improved health (see Table 1). The participants' evaluations of their body, energy, and mind (rated from "bad" to "perfect") increased significantly ( $p < .01$ ) from pre- to post-seminar (see Table 2, 3, and 4). The majority of participants claimed to be mentally calm, physically relaxed, and had a sense of increasing energy, as well as felt very pleasant, happy, and experienced joy during the practice of throat singing. However some did report distressing feelings, such as fear and confusion (see Table 5). Participants reported a variety of transpersonal experiences during throat singing (see Table 6). These included experiences of inner vibrations during listening to singing of the shaman (Nikolay Oorzhak) and/or the first author, as 82% were able to experience vibrations, while only 13% were not able to experience vibrations (and 5% did not reply to this question). The specific places in the participants' bodies where these vibrations were felt upon hearing throat singing by the shaman and/or the first author are displayed in Table 7. During their own throat singing, 90% of participants were able to experience vibrations, while 8% were not (and 2% did not reply to this question). Table 8 shows the specific places in participants' bodies where vibrations were felt during their own throat singing. Last, Table 9 shows a thematic summary of general reflections after the seminars.

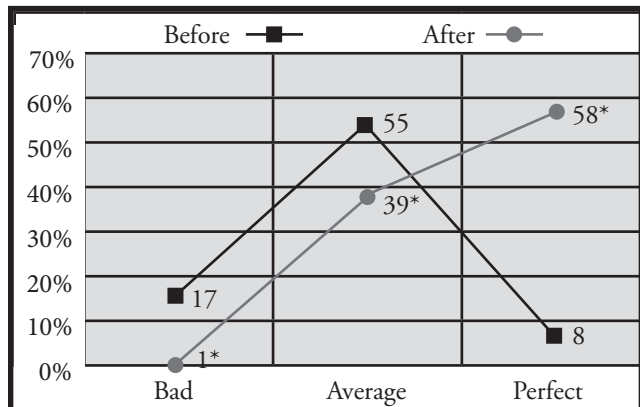
## Discussion

As presented in Table 1, the vast majority of participants were interested in spiritual development, which opened them for transpersonal experiences. Self-eval-

Criteria	Quantity	Percent
spiritual development	152	84
develop singing	117	65
improve health	107	59
curiosity	41	23
another	25	14

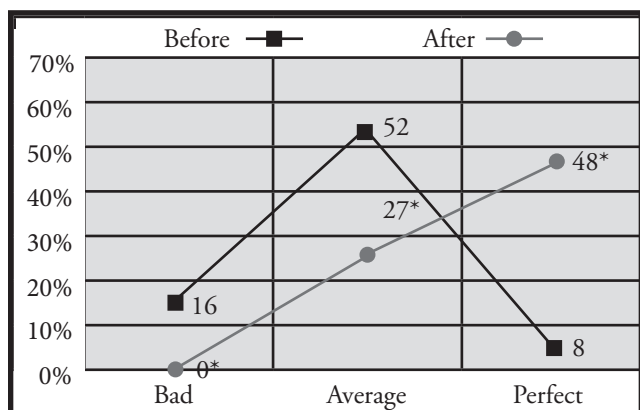
**Table 1.** Motivation of people learning shamanic throat singing.

**Tables 2-4: General evaluation of self-perception on the levels of body, energy, and mind before and after the seminar.**



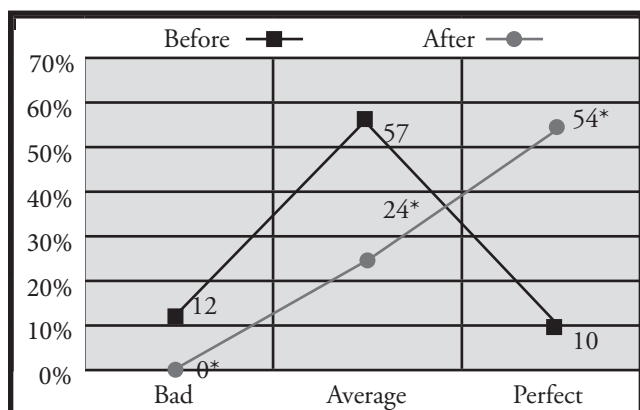
**Table 2.** State of the body before and after seminar.

\*Statistically significant difference between Before and After in each condition: Bad, Average, Perfect =  $p < 0.01$



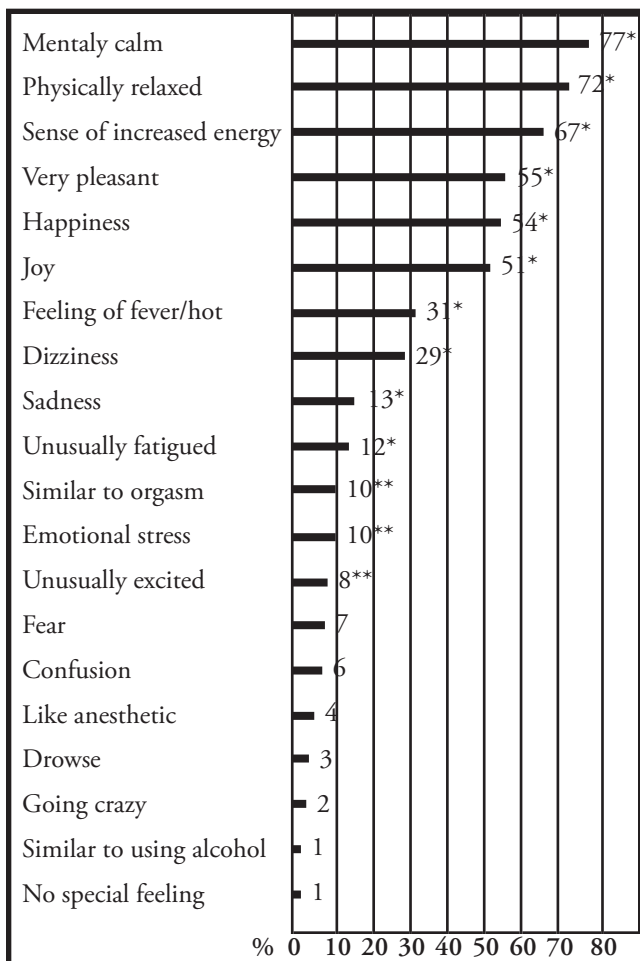
**Table 3.** State of the energy before and after the seminar.

\*Statistically significant difference between Before and After in each condition: Bad, Average, Perfect =  $p < 0.01$



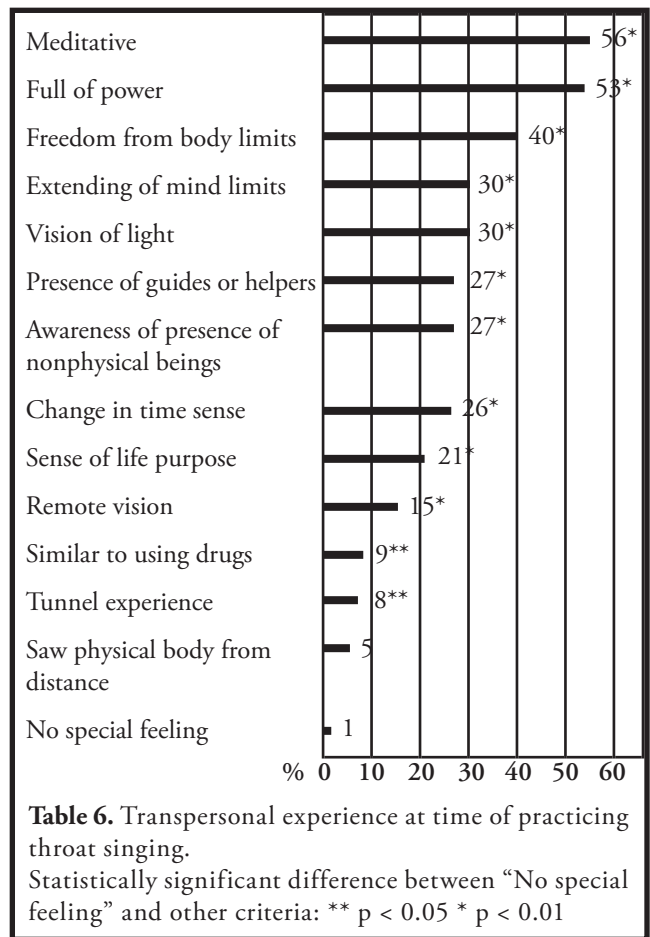
**Table 4.** State of the mind before and after the seminar.

\*Statistically significant difference between Before and After in each condition: Bad, Average, Perfect =  $p < 0.01$

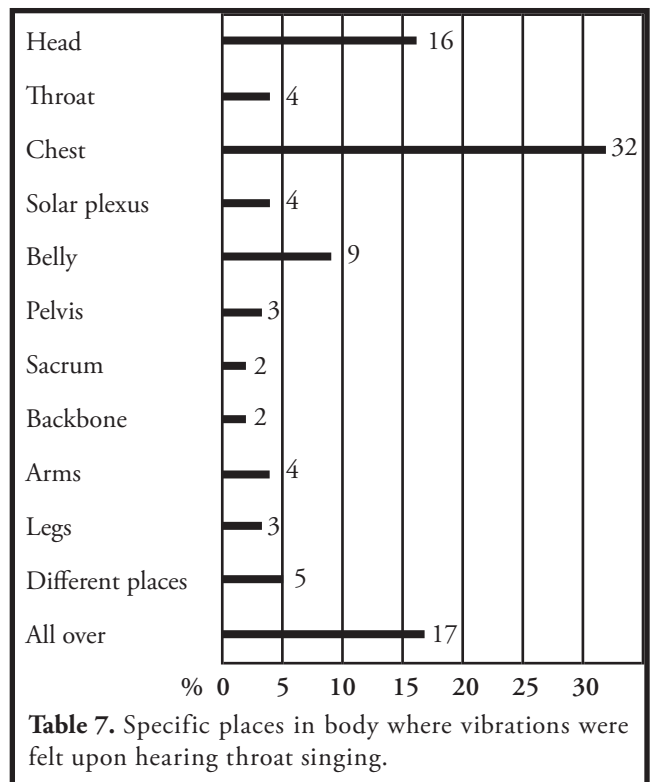


**Table 5.** Feelings and sensations at time of practicing throat singing. Statistically significant difference between “No special feeling” and other criteria: \*\* p < 0.05 \* p < 0.01

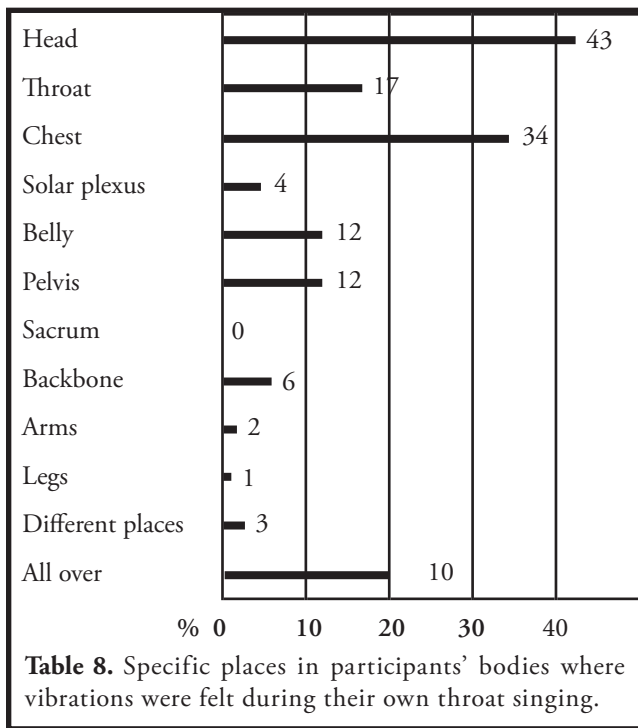
uation of states of body, energy and mind (Tables 2 -4) before the seminar shows that most of participants held average self-perception initially, and hence were likely able to reasonably evaluate their condition. After the seminar, we observed statistically significant changes in positive self-evaluation on all three levels of perception measured, as well as statistically significant decreases in negative self-evaluation. The reason for this may relate to the fact that the vast majority of the participants reported experience of their inner vibrations, which might reflect actual movement of energy caused by the khoomei sound exercises or which could alternatively be explained by other factors. Both listening to seminar leaders’ sounds and self-sounding cause clear sensations in head and chest, plus in the throat at self-sounding, which can feel quite powerful. These results may be attributed to the mechanisms of generating



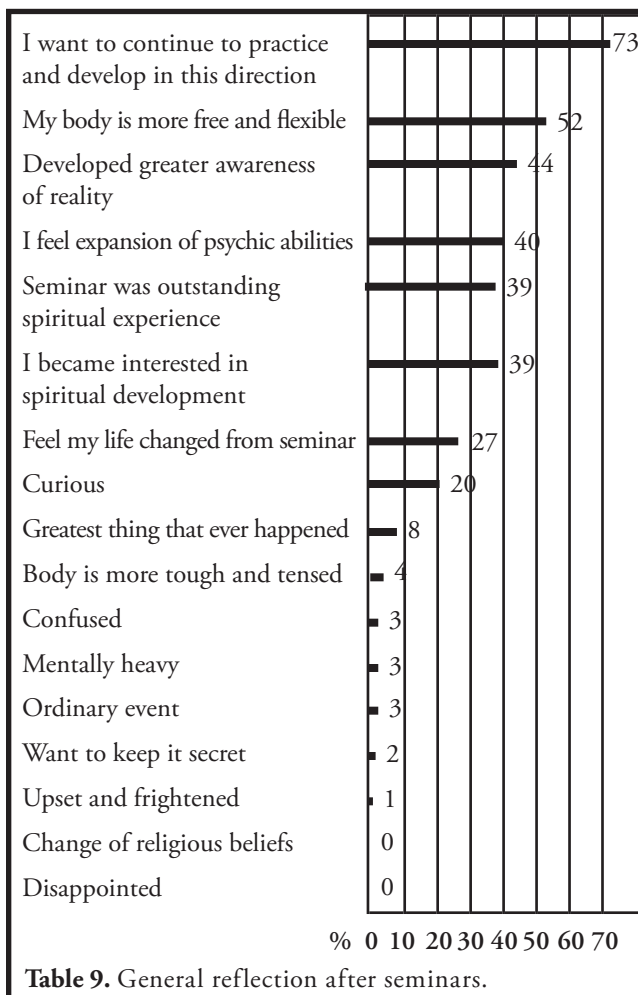
**Table 6.** Transpersonal experience at time of practicing throat singing. Statistically significant difference between “No special feeling” and other criteria: \*\* p < 0.05 \* p < 0.01



**Table 7.** Specific places in body where vibrations were felt upon hearing throat singing.



different styles of throat singing (e.g., sygyt or throat whistle, which is mainly produced in the mouth and nasal cavities, and kargyraa or throat roar, which is mainly produced by chest resonance). These vibrations also appear as different bodily sensations of physical relaxation, increasing energy, pleasure, experiences of heat (including up to fever levels), and even experiences similar to orgasm. On the emotional level, most participants experienced high level of mental calm, happiness, and joy. These positive results are in accord with data of other researchers using both musical sounds and white noise, which can also evoke a similarly calm sensation and relaxation, including soporific feelings of drowsiness (Ogata & Shigeki, 1995). This can lead to decreasing levels of stress, congruent with the findings from Vanderark and Ely (1993) indicating a significant decrease of norepinephrine levels in students who listen to preferred music. From another side, Salimpoor et al. (2011) discovered a release of the brain's pleasure chemical, dopamine, when listening to certain types of music.



Not all the reported effects were positive, however. Twelve percent of participants experienced unusual fatigue, which can possibly be explained by lack of adaptation to breathing and physical exercises used in the seminars, while 29% reported dizziness and 3% drowsiness, which might have resulted from the rising of energy levels during practice. Some participants reported appearance of sadness (13%), emotional stress (10%), and fear (7%). This may be a manifestation of subconsciously suppressed or traumatic psychic material, released in an altered state. However, these negative emotions were not the sole, or even dominating, experience. Comparing these with experiencing positive emotions, we found that of 18 persons who experienced stress, 4 at the same period also felt joy, 5 happiness, and 8 both joy and happiness. Among the 13 participants who experienced fear, 3 at the same period felt joy, 1 happiness, and 7 both joy and happiness. Among 13 participants who experienced sadness, 8 at the same period felt joy, 6 happiness, and 6 both joy and happiness, while the remaining 5 participants reported different non-ordinary experience, including presence of guides or helpers, tunnel experiences, visions of light, seeing their physical body from distance, and so forth. It is possible that the sadness that appeared may have been in part due to some participants losing their positive experience at the end of the seminar.

As shown in Table 6, a number of different transpersonal experiences occurred at the moments of practicing khoomei. Some of them are general, such as meditative feelings, feeling full of power, freedom from body limits, extending of mind limits, and vision of light, but the most remarkable are awareness of presence of nonphysical beings, presence of guides or helpers, change in time sense, sense of life purpose, remote vision, and tunnel experiences. Many of these are quite similar to experiences reported during altered states of consciousness caused by LSD and holotropic breathing (Grof, 1985) and during near-death experiences (Ring, 1982). This similarity suggests a common transpersonal nature in all these phenomena.

Overtones, or harmonics, can be seen as the most powerful element of sound healing (Goldman, 2002). Although music therapy is commonly acknowledged to cause changes in mood and emotions (Diserens, 1948), our research suggests a deeper notion, namely that one's own voice, or hearing that of another, when enriched by overtones, may enable participants to obtain positive transpersonal experiences. One of the possible speculative mechanisms of this effect is that droning harmonics or overtones produces strong results in dissolving blockages in the subtle energy field (e.g., Maman, 1997).

The value of any type of psycho-spiritual practice lies in the field of changes and motivation which can arise in practitioner's experiences and beliefs. As shown in Table 9 on the results of practicing overtone throat singing, participants reported a sense of greater awareness of reality, expansion of psychic abilities, feeling more free and flexible in their bodies, and other benefits. For 39% of participants, the seminar was evaluated as an outstanding spiritual experience, which increased interest in their spiritual development, and 39% also felt that their lives had changed owing to this experience. This created for most of participants (73%) an expressed motivation to continue practice and develop in the same direction.

The results of this research should be interpreted cautiously, however, as it involves analysis of archival data in which some of the usual standards of research were not closely followed. Nevertheless, the data suggest value in conducting further research on khoomei, as well as other shamanic and indigenous healing practices. More broadly, it also points to the potential value for more evaluation and outcome studies of all transpersonal practices.

## Conclusion

The khoomei overtone throat singing adapted from Tuvan shamanic practice as used in the Un-Hun system demonstrated significant altering of participants' consciousness, as well as positive changes in self-perception involving various mental, energetic, and somatic reports. A few mild negative experiences were also reported. It also detected a number of common and specific transpersonal phenomena (e.g., freedom from body limits, extending of mind limits, and visions of light). The results support the need for further empirical investigation on khoomei throat singing as a possible healing tool within the wider practice offered by many transpersonal psychological interventions.

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*Vladislav Matrenitsky, MD, PhD*, graduated from Odessa State Medical University (Ukraine). He completed his PhD on physiology and biochemistry of ageing at Institute of Gerontology of Academy of Medical Science of USSR. He has published in field of gerontology. In 1991 he established the Center for Human Development “Aum” in the Ukraine to investigate the healing and spiritual aspects of voice and sound. This finally brought him to meet in 2001 his Teacher, Nikolay Oorzhak, hereditary Tuvan shaman. Presently he is developing the system and sharing it with a Western world. He has founded in Kiev the Un-Hun School of Healing Throat Singing ([www.un-hun.com](http://www.un-hun.com)) and the Center of Integral Healing. Dr. Matrenitsky is co-founder of the European Transpersonal Psychology Association (ETPA).

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