

BHARATANATYAM AND YOGA

By

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www.geocities.com/yognat2001

INTRODUCTION

Bharatanatyam and Yoga are two ways that exist to help us understand the manifestation of the Divine in the human form. Both of these wonderful arts are products of Sanathana Dharma, which is the bedrock of Indian culture. The Natya Shastra of Bharata Muni lays emphasis on not merely the physical aspects of Bharatanatyam, but also on the spiritual and esoteric nature of this art form. Both of these arts are also evolutionary sciences for the spiritual evolution of the human being to the state of the super human and finally the Divine.

The spiritual and Yogic nature of Bharatanatyam, is very well explained in the following comment by our Guru Yogamani, Yogacharini, Puduvai Kalaimamani Smt Meenakshi Devi Bhavanani who is eminently qualified to talk on this subject being both an eminent world famous Yogi and a distinguished Bharatanatyam artist, rolled into one dynamic being.

“Bharatanatyam is a Yoga, if Yoga means union. For surely this ancient art is one of the most beautiful and satisfying ways of expressing the human longing for union with the Divine. As an art form, Bharatanatyam demands conscious understanding of body, mind and emotions. The sincere dancer must understand the nature of Bhakti and Jnana and the innate longing in all living creatures for Samadhi or cosmic consciousness. The ‘Divine dance of energy’ in the universe, so graphically and beautifully represented by Lord Nataraja, the lord of dance is the source of inspiration for all Bharatanatyam artists who understand the deeper aspects of their art. Especially for the youth, this Divine art is a boon for it shapes the body into graceful controlled beauty, the mind into alertness and sensitivity and the emotions into controlled and purified receptors for the deepest inner longings of humankind. Lord Shiva himself blesses those young people, who take to this art, offering their profound interest, their love and their discipline as Dakshina. Such true Sadhaks then find that Satyam, Shivam and Sundaram – truth, goodness and beauty do flower in their lives, boons granted gladly by the lord of dance to his ardent devotees.”

In modern time, both of these elevating spiritual arts have been the victim of degeneration to such an extent that Bharatanatyam is only treated as a decorative performing art and Yoga as a ‘Keep fit’ exercise thus negating the very soul of these art forms. The depths of the spiritual concepts of these arts have been by far and large lost and they are being practised only at a very superficial and mundane level.

However, there exists a ray of hope at the end of this dark tunnel, as slowly and steadily many of the practitioners of these arts are awakening to their real inner meaning. Many of them are taking concrete steps to bring back the real meaning into the practice of these arts, which are actually ‘lifestyles’ in their true nature.

HISTORY AND MYTHOLOGY

Both Yoga and Bharatanatyam trace their roots to Sanathana Dharma and Lord Shiva is held to be the manifesting principle of both according to the South Indian Shaiva Siddhanta tradition. Dance, music and theatre are an enduring part of Indian culture. In India all forms of art have a sacred origin and the inner experience of the soul finds its highest expression in music and dance. The Hindu attitude towards art as an expression of the Inner beauty or Divine in man brought it into close connection with spirituality and religion. Using the body as a medium of communication, the expression of dance is perhaps the most intricate and developed, yet easily understood art form.

Ancient Indian Civilisation prospered on all fronts, leading to the compilation of epics like the four Vedas, Upanishads, Ramayana, Mahabharatha, Puranas etc., which serve as the basis for all streams of learning. The Vedas (Sama, Yajur, Rig and Atharva) are said to be Divine spiritual knowledge derived from the supreme. Elaborate and eloquent references to the art of dancing abound in the Rig Veda, substantiating that dance was one of the oldest forms of art in India. The

Natya Shastra is the earliest Indian text in the history of performing arts. Over time many classical dance forms emerged in India including Bharatanatyam , Kuchipudi, Kathakali, Mohini Attam, Kathak, Odissi and Manipuri, as well as numerous vigorous folk dances.

According to Natya Shastra and Abhinaya Darpana, Lord Brahma created the art of dance upon the request of the Gods as a form of entertainment and it became known as the fifth Veda, and was open to all, irrespective of caste and creed. Prior to the creation of the Natya Veda, Brahma entered a Yogic trance in which he recalled the four Vedas. He drew literature from the Rig Veda, song from the Sama Veda, Abhinaya or expression from the Yajur Veda and Rasa or aesthetic experience from the Atharva Veda. These aspects are the four main constituents of the Natya Veda. Lord Brahma passed on this Natya Veda to his son, sage Bharata, who passed it on to his 100 sons. Thus this divine art descended from the heavens to Earth. Lord Shiva took up the Tandava (masculine form of dance), whereas Goddess Parvati, his consort, took up the Lasya (feminine form). Bharata staged the first play with his hundred sons and Apsaras in the amphitheatre of the Himalayas. Lord Shiva, the ultimate dancer, was so enchanted that he sent his disciple Tandu to Bharata, to teach him the true elements of dance. These are depicted in the Natya Shastra, in its chapters collectively named the Tandava Lakshana.

Lord Nataraja is considered to be the God of dance in Hindu mythology. His dancing image, in the Tandava form, is the starting point of all creation. To the dancer the four arms of the Nataraja are a depiction of dance movement in an immovable and static medium. The mystique of the arms and legs of the figure has a cosmological significance as the dance is taken as merely a human representation of a cosmic fact. In the Nataraja image the frontal palm of the right hand, which is lifted and slightly bent, represents security (Abhaya) to devotees. The left hand, which is thrown across the body with the fingers pointing downwards, indicates the feet of the Lord as the refuge of devotees. The upraised left foot represents the blessing bestowed by the Lord. In the right upper hand Shiva carries a small drum representing the creative sound, which began the universe, and in the other hand he has a fire, which is symbolic of light and therefore destruction of ignorance. Under the right foot is a dwarf, which signifies triumph over evil. Encapsulated in this figure of the Dancing Lord is the entire function of Shiva as the creator, preserver and destroyer. This dance is a metaphor for the belief that life is essentially a dynamic balancing of good and bad, where opposites are interdependent. The dance of Shiva is the dance of life.

Each Indian classical dance form draws inspiration from stories depicting the life, ethics and beliefs of the Indian people. The genesis of the contemporary styles of classical dances can be traced to a period around 1000-1500 years ago. India offers a number of classical dance forms, each of which can be traced to different parts of the country. Each form represents the culture and ethos of a particular region or a group of people. Bharatanatyam flourished in areas of Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. Kuchipudi is another famous classical dance of South India, from Andhra Pradesh. Kathakali is a theatrical dance form of Kerala. Mohini Attam is the feminine counterpart of Kathakali. Kathak is the classical dance form of North India and has two main Gharanas or schools - the Jaipur Gharana and the Lucknow Gharana. Odissi is the classical dance of Orissa and was mainly centered around Puri and Bhubaneswar. Manipuri is the classical dance of the Northeastern state of Manipur. Besides these, there are several semi-classical dances that contribute to the plethora of Indian dances.

In India, classical dance and music pervade all aspects of life and bring color, joy and gaiety to a number of festivals and ceremonies. In fact, dance and music in India are tied inextricably to festivity of any kind.

KEY ASPECTS OF BHARATANATYAM

Bharatanatyam is a seamless blend of Nritta (rhythmic elements), Nritya (combination of rhythm with expression) and Natya (dramatic element).

Nritta is the rhythmic movement of the body in dance. It does not express any emotion. Nritya is usually expressed through the eyes, hands and facial movements. Nritya combined with Nritta makes up the usual dance programs. Nritya comprises Abhinaya, depicting Rasa (sentimental) and Bhava (mood).

To appreciate Natya or dance drama, one has to understand and appreciate Indian legends. Most Indian dances take their themes from India's rich mythology and folk legends. Hindu Gods and Goddesses like Shiva and Parvati, Vishnu and Lakshmi, Rama and Sita, Krishna and Radha are all depicted in classical Indian dances.

Classical dance is a combination of Bhava, Raga and Tala (mood, melody and rhythm). The Gati or gait is stylized for each classical dance form. The Gati is also called Chaal in Kathak, Chali in Odissi and Nadai in Bharatanatyam .

ABHINAYA:

Abhinaya is the rhythmic expression of moods, emotions and a narrative through the use of Mudra (hand gestures), Bhanga (postures of the body) and Rasa (facial expressions). Abhinaya has been vividly described in Abhinaya Darpana, a medieval work on histrionics that was codified by Nandikeswara.

“Abhinaya” literally means the “representation or exposition of a certain theme”. The basic root meaning is from the Sanskrit “Abhi” which means “to or towards” – with the root “Ni” – “to lead”. Abhinaya thus means, “to lead (the audience and performer) towards a particular state of being or feeling.” “Abhinaya ” has four aspects namely: Aangika, Vachika, Aahaarya and Saathvika. Aangika is the language of expression through the medium of the body (Sharira), the face (Mukha) and movement (Cheshta). Vachika Abhinaya is the expression through words, literature and drama; Aahaarya, the expression through decoration such as make-up, jewellery and costumes; Saathvika, the expression through acting out and manifesting the different state of the mind and feelings.

Lord Shiva is praised as the embodiment of the above four types of Abhinaya in this following Shloka that is recited by all dancers in the initial part of their training in an effort to make them realise the divine nature of this art form.

**ANGIKAM BHUVANAM YASYA VACHICAM SARVA VANGMAYAM
AHARYAM CHANDRA TARADI TAM VANDE SATVIKAM SHIVAM.**

(We bow to Him the benevolent One, Whose limbs are the world, Whose song and poetry are the essence of all language, Whose costume is the moon and the stars.)

POSTURES:

The ideal postures of the body are depicted in the Shilpa Shastra and there are four types of Bhangas (postures), the deviations of the body from the central erect position. These four Bhangas are: Abhanga, Samabhanga, Atibhanga and Tribhanga. Abhanga signifies "off-center", an iconographic term for a slightly askew standing position. Samabhanga is the equal distribution of the body limbs on a central line, whether standing or sitting. Atibhanga is the great bend with the torso diagonally inclined and the knees bent. Tribhanga is the triple bend with one hip raised, the torso curved to the opposite side and the head tilted at an angle.

MUDRAS:

Mudras are found in both Yoga and dance and while they are used for communicating externally in dance there are used for internal communication in Yoga. In dance, the way a Hastha Mudra is held, is divided into 12 Prana Lakshanas or 12 different ways of holding a hand.

1. Prakarana Hastha - The fingers are stretched
2. Kunchita Hastha - The fingers are folded
3. Rechita Hastha - The fingers are given movement
4. Punchita Hastha - The fingers are folded or moved or stretched
5. Apaveshtita Hastha - The fingers are bent down
6. Prerita Hastha - The fingers are bent back or moved or stretched
7. Udveshtita Hastha - Holding the hands UP while dancing
8. Vyavrutta Hastha - Hands help UP in the sides
9. Parivrutta Hastha - Hands are brought together from sides
10. Sanketa Hastha - Hands used to convey Implied Meanings
11. Chinha Hastha - While dancing a dancer tries to show lot of things which are visible and invisible like a person's physical appearance, face, weapons, places of limbs and other parts of the body, his/her influence on others, their mannerisms etc. Hands used to show such things are called Chinhe

12. Padarthateeke - Hands used to confirm the meanings of certain words

The Hastha Mudras or hand gestures of Bharatanatyam are a very highly developed aspect of the art and are a science of communication with the Divine. They are used for a variety of reasons such as to mime the meaning of the song, convey deeper feelings, bring out inherent qualities, invoke the myriad forms of the Divine as in Navagraha and Dashavathara Hasthas or in some cases they may be simple aesthetic ornamentation. Some have very limited meanings, and some are used as catch-alls for miming a variety of ideas.

The Natya Shastra lists numerous Mudras along with their meanings. Many others have been developed in the time since, whose histories are harder to trace. In the cases where an idea is being conveyed, it is more important to communicate clearly with hand gestures - adapting them if necessary - than it is to perform them with rigid correctness.

Hand gestures of Bharatanatyam are classified as

ASAMYUTHA HASTHA - Single hand gestures

SAMYUTHA HASTHA - Double hand gestures

There are 28 Asamyutha Hasthas and 24 Samyutha Hasthas. Each Hastha has a defined usage called Vinyoga. These Vinyogas are again Sanskrit Shlokas codified in the Natyashastra.

ASAMYUTHA HASTHA (SINGLE HAND GESTURES)

*Pataka Tripatakordhapataka Kartareemukhaha
Mayurakyordhachand rashcha Arala Shukatundakaha
Mushtishta Shikarakyashcha Kapitha Kata kamukhaha
Suchee Chandrakala Padmakosham Sarpashirastata
Mrugasheersha Simhamukho Langulasolapadmakaha
Chaturo Bramarashchiva Hamsasyo Hamsapakshakaha
Samdamsho Mukulashchiva Tamrachooda Trishoolakaha
Ashtavimshati hastha Naam Evam Naamaanivikramat.*

SAMYUTHA HASTHA (DOUBLE HAND GESTURES)

*Anjalishcha Kapotashcha Karkata Swastikastatha
Dolahasta Pushpaputaha Utsanga Shivalingakaha
Katakavardhanashchiva Kartaree Swatikastata
Shakata Shankha Chakrecha Samputa Pasha Keelakau
Matsya Koorma Varahashcha Garudonagabandakaha
Khatwa Bherundakakhayashcha Avahitastathivacha
Chaturvimshatisankhyakaha Samyuta Katithakaraha*

Different schools and styles of dance use different hand gestures and different terms for the same hand gestures. Most have a fairly similar set of terms that largely overlap with this list, but many may be different in the details. It is largely a case of individual style, and the important thing is to communicate the ideas clearly.

NAVA RASA:

Nritya is that manifestation of dancing that includes both Rasa (aesthetic flavour) and Bhava (human emotions), as in the dance with Abhinaya, the art of expression.

There are nine major classical categories of emotions or Rasa, called Nava Rasas that are depicted in the Abhinaya of Bharatanatyam . These are Shringara (erotic love), Haasya (humour and laughter), Karuna (compassion), Roudra (anger), Veera (heroism), Bhaya (fearful terror), Bheebatsa (disgust), Adbhuta (wonder-awe) and Shanta (peacefulness).

The Nava Rasas are a major form of emotional catharsis and Natya (dance) helps cleanse the negative aspects of human emotions and sublimate them for higher emotions of Divine Bhakti. They are also a great means of psychological preventive therapy as most modern societies give little or no scope for expression of these emotions in the proper manner.

The Nava Rasas also help youngsters to learn about these emotions in a positive manner. They can then produce a balanced wholesome personality who embodies Sama Bhava or equal mindedness.

According to one of the greatest exponents of Bharatanatyam , Balasaraswati "Bharatanatyam , in its highest moment, is the embodiment of music in its visual form. For more than thousand years, the Shastras have confirmed that an individual dedicated to dance must be equally dedicated to music and must receive thorough training in both the arts. In demonstrating the art of Bharatanatyam abroad, I have made a special point of showing audiences how delicately linked is the realisation of movement to Raga expression in Abhinaya, including the subtle expression of Gamakas, intonation of Sruti, and the unfolding of improvisation in Niraval. In the same way that we look for perfect blending of Raga and Tala and of Raga and Bhava in Abhinaya, so also it is essential that the Raga and the Sahitya be perfectly matched and in accordance with the necessities of expression in the dance."

She also points out, "Shringara stands supreme in this range of emotions. No other emotion is capable of better reflecting the mystic union of the human with the Divine. I say this with great personal experience of dancing to many great devotional songs, which have had no element of Shringara in them. Devotional songs are, of course, necessary. However, Shringara is the cardinal emotion, which gives the fullest scope for artistic improvisation, branching off continually, as it does, into the portrayal of innumerable moods full of newness and nuance".

She continues in the same vein by saying, "If we approach Bharatanatyam with humility, learn it with dedication and practice it with devotion to God, Shringara which brings out the great beauties of this dance can be portrayed with all the purity of the spirit. The flesh, which is considered to be an enemy of the spirit and the greatest obstacle to spiritual realization, has itself been made a vehicle of the Divine in the discipline of the dance. Shringara thus is an instrument for uniting the dancer with Divinity. Since the dancer has universalized her experience, all that she goes through is also felt and experienced by the spectator".

NATYA KARANAS

Acrobatic Natya Karanas are very much a part of the traditional Bharatanatyam repertoire. 108 Natya Karanas have been described in the Natya Shastra. Natya Karanas are not only particular poses as is commonly believed, but also are cadences of movements. It is necessary for an understanding of the Karanas that the dancer masters the movements of the separate parts of the body like the neck, head, feet, thighs, waist and hands, and understands how geometric shapes can be created with the Angas (limbs). Evidence of Natya Karanas is very clear in studying sculptures and paintings in Gopuram walls, ceilings and courtyards of our ancient Dravidian temples, especially in Chidambaram, Kumbakonam, Thanjavur and Tiruvannamalai, where dancers are depicted in acrobatic stances. These stances are very similar to Yoga Asanas. On the Gopuram walls at Chidambaram there are many classical dance poses, which are also Yoga Asanas.

Tandava, the classical dance, takes its name from Tandu, the celestial attendant of Lord Shiva who instructed the sage Bharata in the use of the Angaharas and Karanas, the plastic modes of Tandava at Lord Shiva's behest. A Karana is a unit of dance in which gesture, step and attitude are coordinated in a harmonious rhythmic movement. A sequence of six or more Karanas is called an Angahara. Anga refers to the body and Hara is a name of Lord Shiva, creator of the Tandava, comprising 32 Angaharas composed of 108 Karanas. The Nataraja temple of Chidambaram is sculpted with these 108 Karanas on the inner walls of the 4 gateways leading to the temple. These lovely sculptures vividly depict the Tandava dance form.

While Shiva performed the Tandava, several Karanas were linked together as a garland of dance poses with the help of Rechakas or pauses. These became the Angaharas, garlands of dance poses for lord Hara. Each combination of Angahara contains six, seven, eight or nine Karanas. There are thirty-two Angaharas, according to Bharata. Later, learned experts in the field of dance created several additional Angaharas in their own style. These were in different combinations of Karanas and subsequently were different from those of Bharata.

According to experts of dance therapy, each of these 108 positions corresponds to one of the different human emotions. Holding a posture enhances the emotion it corresponds to. The length of time that the posture needs to be held will depend on how quickly you wish your energy sphere to become contented. You will need to perform the two or three postures for the counteracting emotion to the one you suffer from for a maximum total of 30 minutes per week for one year in order to get cured, and become contented in this respect. In practicing the opposing Karana, only the body, leg and arm movements need to be considered - not the detailed head, hand and foot

gestures. Also, one does not need to be concerned with the movement into or out of the posture; nor with the actual emotion being represented - the mind needs to remain calm.

The Karanas in the Brihadeshwara Temple are sculpted on the walls of an inaccessible room on top of the Sanctum Sanctorum, and consist of about 87, four-armed, large figures of Shiva in Karana poses, with one pair of hands holding various weapons. There are other stray Karana figures, scattered all over Southern India in other temples. Strictly speaking, the Karana is an entire dance movement whereas the Karana-Sculpture is just one static pose taken from these. The beautiful bracket and wall figures of the Chennakesava temple at Belur, and the Hoysaleswara temple at Halebid depict dancers in a variety of poses that can be easily identified with the Caris, the Sthanakas and the Karanas described in the Natya Shastra. After a deep study of the sculptures at Chidambaram, scholars have classified Karanas into nine types. According to Sarangadeva in the Sangita Ratnakar, a beautiful classical pose, formed by changing the hands and legs in dance, conditioned by the mood or flavour, is known as a Karana. Bharata, in the Natya Shastra, merely defines a Karana as a combined movement of the feet and the hands that, though momentarily static, is a dynamic series of movements, which culminates in a specific pose. By themselves, the Karanas are beautiful aspects of dance, believed to have originated with Lord Nataraja's Tandava. Pundits like Somanathkavi, Abhinavgupta and Sarangadeva suggested their use along with Bhava so as to expand their utility into the realm of Abhinaya. Over the years, Gurus interpreted Karanas with expressions in the Bhagavata Mela Natakam style, thereby incorporating these Karanas into Javalis and Padams.

The Natya Karanas give us a static element to offset the dynamic movements of the dance. This is important, for a pause is as important as a movement in classical dance. Natya Karanas have not found prominence in the modern repertoire and one of the major reasons may be the physical inability of modern dancers to perform them. Most dancers today are overweight and inflexible due to the effects of modern lifestyle and diet. Unless a person has tremendous dedication and determination it will be very difficult to be able to perform most of the acrobatic Natya Karanas. We often see dancers struggle to stand even on one leg in a feeble attempt to recreate the masterly Karanas.

Under the dynamic leadership of Kalaimamani Yogacharini Meenakshi Devi Bhavanani, Yoganjali Natyalayam, Pondicherry's premier institute of Yoga, Bharatanatyam and Carnatic music has tried to restore the acrobatic Karanas to the Bharat Natyam repertoire. According to Yogacharya Dr Ananda Balayogi Bhavanani, Chairman Yoganjali Natyalayam, acrobatic Natya Karanas are very much a part of the traditional Bharat Natyam repertoire, but have been practically lost in today's performances. He says that evidence of their presence in this art form is very clear in studying bas relief, sculptures and paintings in Gopurams, walls, ceilings and courtyards of our ancient Dravidian temples, especially in Chidambaram, Kumbakonam, Thanjavur and Tiruvannamalai, where dancers are depicted in acrobatic stances. He also points out that these stances are very similar to Yoga Asanas, and in the Gopuram walls at Chidambaram, at least twenty different classical Yoga Asanas are depicted by the dancers, including Dhanurasana, Chakrasana, Vrikshasana, Natarajasana, Trivikramasana, Ananda Tandavasana, Padmasana, Siddhasana, Kaka Asana, Vrishchikasana and others. Yoganjali Natyalayam has as one of its aims the restoration of these acrobatic Karanas to the classical Bharatanatyam performance and this is possible only by combining sustained Yogic discipline with dance training from an early age. The sincere and regular practice of Yoga from early childhood helps to re-create the Karanas efficiently and many of the students of Yoganjali Natyalayam have become experts in the artistic presentation of these Karanas.

SIMILARITIES BETWEEN THE APPROACHES OF YOGA AND BHARATANATYAM

There are a great many facets of Yoga and Bharatanatyam that are similar to each other. Some of these will be described in this section.

DISCIPLINE:

This is an important quality required in both Yoga and Bharatanatyam . Yoga can be defined as discipline and one of the important aspects of Yoga is the emphasis on Tapas as discipline. Yoga also emphasizes that Abhyasa or dedicated and determined practice is vital for success. No dancer can ever expect to master this art without a similar approach of dedicated, determined, sincere and regular Riaz or Sadhana. Sadhana and Abhyasa are vital for success.

GURU BHAKTI:

Both arts stress the importance of Guru Bhakti and the role of Guru Krupa in achieving success in all endeavors. The Guru is held even higher than God and this is explained in the following way. A hypothetical question is asked as follows. If God and Guru appear before you at the same time, to whom will you bow down first? The answer is that we will bow to the Guru first as he is the one who will show us God. Without the Guru we cannot recognize the Divine even if he is standing in front of us.

The traditional method of learning in both of these arts was the Guru-Chela relationship that was often in the Gurukula pattern where the student lived with the Guru as a family member learning 24-hours-a-day for many years before mastering the art. This was a real trial by fire in many cases and only the true seeker would be able to pass such a test. Nowadays both these arts have become academic in nature and a lot has been lost in this transition from Gurukula to college method of imparting instruction.

BHAKTI RASA AND BHAKTI YOGA:

One of the important streams of Yoga is Bhakti Yoga and this is related to the Bhakti Rasa of Bharatanatyam. All great Bhakti Yogis of our ancient Indian history were deeply immersed in music and dance in their love for the divine. Meerabhai, Thiagaraja, Chaithanya Maha Prabhu, Andal, Karaikal Ammaiyan, Nandanar and Avvaiyan are some of the few examples of such Bhakti Yogis. It is said that Lord Shiva danced the Ananda Tandava at Thillai (Chidambaram) following the request of his great Bhaktas, Sage Patanjali and Sage Vyagrapadha. Similarly he also is believed to have given the benevolent Darshan of his Cosmic Dance for the great woman saint, Karaikal Ammaiyan.

VIBRATIONAL PLANE:

Mantra Yoga and Nada Yoga are related to the Indian Classical Music that is an integral part of Bharatanatyam. The vibrations produced by the sounds of music and the use of the Bhija Mantras of Laya Yoga and Mantra Yoga has a similar effect in arousing latent and potent energies of our inner being. Bharatanatyam utilises numerous shapes that are similar to the Mandalas of Yoga and Yantra and these shapes also produce a bio-electro-magnetic field that energizes not only the dancer but also her audience too. All matter is vibration and the differences are only due to the different speeds of vibration that result in differing degrees of freedom. This is well understood by modern physicists, one of whom, Fritjof Capra even went to the extent of declaring the principle of Lord Nataraja as the most apt symbol of quantum physics itself in his book, "The Tao of Physics".

SPIRITUAL PLANE:

The concept of unification of Jivatma and Paramatma and the longing of the Jivatma for this union finds common manifestation in both dance and Yoga. Both aim to transcend the individualistic Ahamkara and evolve into the ultimate universality. The legendary pioneer Rukmini Devi, founder of Kalakshetra rightly observed that dance is a form of Yoga. She said, "It needs true Bhakti or devotion. We have no more temple dancing today, but we can bring the spirit of the temple to the stage. This will change our entire attitude towards this art and then our physical bodies will become transmuted and non-physical. Every performance becomes a means of not only making the dancer one with the higher Divine Self but the audience too. This oneness is Yoga".

Martha Graham, one of the greatest of modern dancers was able to transcend his individuality when he said, "I am interested only in the subtle being, the subtle body beneath the gross muscles."

The roles of the Nayaki pining for her lord are meant to portray the pining of the Jiva for the spiritual union with the Paramatma. The Sakhi, the friend who brings about this union in dance is in reality the Guru who helps the Sadhaka reach that state Ultimate Universal Unification. The legendary Balasaraswathi who became synonymous with Bharatanatyam for many a Rasika said revealingly, "Bharatanatyam is an artistic Yoga (Natya Yoga), for revealing the spiritual through the corporeal".

CONCENTRATION AND MEDITATION:

The sixth step of Ashtanga Yoga is Dharana or concentration. This concentration when taken to its extreme leads us into the meditative state of Dhyana. Many of the concentrative practices of Yoga

are based on the Mandalas that are assigned to the different elements of the manifest universe. The dancer requires a similar state of utmost concentration in order to bring about the union of Bhava, Raga and Tala in her presentation. The different aspects of Bharatanatyam such as Nritta, Nritya and Natya must be seamlessly unified with great concentrative ability for the performance to peak in its intensity. When the dancer achieves that peak of concentration in her performance she loses herself into the state of meditation. The Yogic state of Dhyana and the trance like states experienced by the dancers while performing are quite similar in their universal nature. Shri Tiruvenkatachari, an eminent dance historian (1887) compared Yoga with the dance and said that the secret is ‘forgetfulness of the individual self’. He also mentioned that dance is a means of attaining Moksha just as is Yoga.

BENEFITS OF YOGA FOR DANCERS

According to the Abhinaya Darpana of Nandikeswara, the important inner qualities of the dancer (Antah Prana) are as follows.

JAVAH STIRATVAM REKHA
BRAHMARI DRISHTI ASHRAMAHA
MEDHA SHRADDHA VACHO GEETAM

JAVAH –swiftness or speed

STIRATVAM –composure or steadiness

REKHA -symmetry

BRAHMARI –versatility and circular movements

DRISHTI –glances of the eyes

ASHRAMAHA –ease and tirelessness

MEDHA -intelligence

SHRADDHA –confidence and interest

VACHO –clear speech

GEETAM-capacity of song

All of these inner qualities can be developed and maintained through the practice of Yoga and in addition to the above mentioned aspects of the personality, it is important for the dancer to have numerous physical and mental qualities that can be obtained through a dedicated practice of Yoga as a way of life.

STRENGTH, BALANCE AND CONCENTRATION:

These physical qualities are essential for the dancer at all stages of their artistic career. The standing poses such as Padahastasana, Padangushtasana, Trikonasana, Natarajasana, Virasana and its variations, Garudasana, Padottanasana are especially useful to develop strength in the legs and thighs. One legged poses such as the Natarajasana, Garudasana, Vrikshasana, Vatayanasana, Eka Padasana and Ardha Chandrasana help develop an excellent sense of balance as well as improve single minded concentration.

The hand balancing poses such as Mayurasana, Titibasana, Vrichikasana, Dolasana and Hamsasana develop strength in the shoulders, arms and wrists that is essential for holding the arms up in numerous Nritta sequences such as in the Alarippu, Varnam and Tillana.

CARRIAGE AND CENTRE OF GRAVITY:

Yogasanas help develop proper carriage and back bending postures such as Ushtrasana, Bhujangasana and Chakrasana avoids the hunchbacks that are common in modern school going children from carrying heavy loads of books. Repeated practice of balancing poses on right and left sides as well as from different positions such as supine, prone, and the topsy turvy poses, the

centre of gravity is improved and this leads to a perfect positioning of the body in performance of the various items.

STAMINA AND ENDURANCE:

Practices such as the solar plexus-charging Agnisara, the Hakara Kriya with the activating sound of HA and the Malla Kriya with the Nasarga Muka Bhastrika as well as the practice of Suryanamaskar help improve stamina and endurance. Padmashri Adyar K Lakshmanan, one of the most eminent Bharatanatyam masters of modern India, has often marveled at the stamina and endurance that is possessed by the students of Yoganjali Natyalayam. He attributes it to their practice of Yoga and feels that Yoga gives them abundant energy to go through the most vigorous of items without requiring any rest at all in between lines or even in between items. The hand balancing poses such as Mayurasana, Titibasana and Bakasana as well as postures such as Paschimottanasana, Navasana, Sarvangasana and Halasana help greatly in this regard. Performance of Suryanamaskar slowly with emphasis on breathing and performance of various Pranayamas such as Vibhaga and Pranava Pranayamas helps to energize the entire system. We can balance the catabolic breakdown of the body by the anabolic activities of Yoga, thus retarding the aging process and also give the dancer the invaluable gift of a longer professional life.

BUOYANCY AND AGILITY:

Various Asanas and Pranayamas are useful in developing a sense of buoyancy and improving the agility of the dancer. Practice of Pranayama helps to achieve a state of lightness of the body that can be compared to the Yogic Siddhi of Lagima or being as light as a feather. Agility is an important quality required by the dancer as there are numerous variations of gaits (Gathi Bhedhams) in Bharatanatyam and she needs to be extremely agile in order to execute them perfectly. The ten Gathi Bhedhams are usually described as Hamsee (Swan like gait), Mayooree (Peacock like gait), Mrigee (Deer like gait), Gajaleela (Elephant like gait), Thuranginee (jumping gait), Simhee (gait of the Lion), Bhujangee (snake like gait), Mandookee (frog like gait), Veera (heroic gait), Manavee (man like gait). Single leg balancing postures such as Vrikshasana, Natarajasana, Rathacharyasana, Eka Padasana, Vira Bhadrasana, Hastapadangusthasana and Garudasana as well as the back bending poses such as Chakrasana, Dhanurasana and Ushtrasana instill great agility in the dancer.

FLEXIBILITY:

One of the important physical attributes required by a dancer is flexibility of the body. Jattis and other practices of the Shetali Karana Vyayama, spinal twists such as Ardha Matsyendrasana and Vakrasana, back bending Asanas like Laghu Vajrasana, Rajakapotasana, Chakrasana and Dhanurasana and forward bending Asanas such as Padahasthasana, Paschimottanasana, and Halasana ensure flexibility of the body. The body can then be a supple and well-tuned instrument that allows her to perform any movement that she wishes effortlessly and gracefully while dancing. This effortlessness is essential for a dancer because, when she makes any movement with strain, not only does she suffer but the sensitive Rasikas are also jarred out of the smooth harmony that had been earlier effected in them by her easy and flowing movements.

COORDINATION:

Practice of Suryanamaskar, alternate nostril breathing Pranayamas such as Nadi Shuddhi and Loma Viloma as well as various Jattis help to develop right-left coordination and balance in the dancer. Asanas wherein the hands are joined to the feet like Padahasthasana, Janasirasasana, Paschimottanasana and Akarna Dhanurasana are very useful to develop hand-foot as well as right-left coordination, very essential for a smooth performance. Yoga is isometric and internal. It is a contest between our inherent inertia and the power of the will. Parts of the body are pitted against one another and a unique harmony of body, mind and breath is developed. This internal struggle when handled successfully deepens the consciousness of not only the working of the body but also of the mind and emotions.

Right-left brain function is improved by Pranayamas as right nostril breathing stimulates the left-brain and vice versa. This helps improve coordination between the two halves of the body and thus produce an artistic and perfect symmetry, essential for a good dancer.

MUSCULOSKELETAL BENEFITS:

A regular practice of Yoga helps the dancer avoid hip, back, shoulder, neck and knee related problems that are rampant in the modern dance world. Practices such as Baddha Konasana, Jatara Parivrittaanasana, Hanumanasana, Trikonasana, Padotannasana, Upavishta Konasana, and Mandukasana are good for the hips and legs. Vajrasana and its variations as well as the Garudasana are good for the feet while Chatus Padasana, Bhujangasana, Kaya Kriya, Shalabhasana and Ushtrasana are excellent for the back. Even in dancers suffering from these musculoskeletal disorders, Yoga can help them recover faster and better as well as limit the morbidity and disability that may otherwise result from over use and misuse of these parts of the body. Brahma Mudra, Kaya Kriya, Tala Kriya and Dridha Kriya are extremely beneficial for health of the entire musculoskeletal system.

PHYSIOLOGICAL FUNCTION:

Yoga helps develop all systems of the human body (cardiovascular, respiratory, digestive, eliminative, endocrine, nervous and musculoskeletal) thus strengthening, cleansing and purifying the human body so that it is brought under our conscious will. This is vital for the dancers.

Yoga stimulates and strengthens the neuro-endocrine system and it counteracts the body stiffness, changes in skin tone and hair loss, which are common problems due to glandular imbalance. Youthfulness that is essential for a dancer is the byproduct of neuro-endocrine health and this can be attained by a regular Yoga practice.

All round health is developed which will stand the dancer in good stead even after retirement, saving them the ‘post retirement blues and breakdowns’.

ENERGY:

In the science of Yoga, body movement and breath must be synchronized. The body is lifted on the incoming breath and lowered on the outgoing breath. Bhastrika or the ‘bellows breath’ activate the solar plexus, which is an energy reservoir, as well as strengthens the diaphragm thus producing strength, vitality and endurance. Pranayamas such as Mukha Bhastrika stimulate the internal cleansing of toxins. Breath is directly related to energy levels, life span, quality of emotions, state of mind and the clarity and subtlety of thoughts. This use of breath power with the body movements brings about revolutionary effects on the performance of the dancers. This synchronicity of breath and movement also improves their state of mind, control of emotions and all round physical and psychological health. Laya Yoga practices such as the Mantralaya as well as Pranayamas like the Kapalabhati, Surya Pranayama and Surya Bhedana and other practices such as Surya Namaskar, Paschimottanasana, Nauli and Agnisara help to create an energy reservoir that can be tapped into at will.

AWARENESS:

According to Yogamaharishi Swami Gitananda Giri Guru Maharaj, Yoga is four fold awareness. We become aware of the body through Asanas. We become aware of the emotions through Pranayama and thorough the meditative practices we can become aware of the mind. When we transcend the individualistic ego, we become aware of awareness itself. A Yogi sits in a cave, but feels himself all pervading and eternal. Similarly in drama and dance, the limitation of time is dissolved. The experience of a dancer and a Yogi is the same - to go beyond worldliness and to transcend one's individual self.

STRESS AND RELAXATION:

Yoga has a lot to offer in terms of stress reduction. Dancers face a lot of stress in terms of preparation for performances and high expectations of the teachers, friends, relatives and the audience. Critics and other writers also tend to increase the pressures on the dancer.

Yogic Asanas, Pranayamas and Jnana Yoga Kriyas, work on the various Koshas of our body and clear up all the subconscious 'quirks' in our brain from the billions of years of evolution from animal to the human state. An understanding of these 'quirks' helps us to understand our reaction to various situations and helps to prevent our 'stress response' to them. 'Stress Relievers' from Hatha Yoga and Jnana Yoga are of immense benefit in relieving pent up emotions and tempering our reactions to stressful situations.

Yoga has a lot to offer to dancers through the field of relaxation. In the dance world, all is PUSH, PUSH and PUSH. There is little room for relaxation in the arena. Yoga teaches us that there has to be balance.

The Yogic concept of ‘Spandha-Nishpandha’ or ‘exertion-relaxation-exertion-relaxation’ in an alternating rhythm is unique to the Yogic art of relaxation and provides a counterfoil to the extreme stress of competitive and performance related pressures, thus fostering mental, emotional and physical health.

Pranayamas such as Brahmari, Pranava, Shetali and Sitkari are excellent stress relievers. Shavasana with a great variety of relaxation practices as well as the Bhujangini Mudra and Pavana Mukta Kriyas are an excellent foil against stress. Yoga Nidra and the performance of Savitri Pranayama in Shavasana can help produce total relaxation at all levels.

PROVIDING ANSWERS TO DEEPER YEARNINGS:

The philosophy of Yoga helps the dancer to come to grips with many questions that pop up in their life. Classical dance in ancient times was associated with high levels of moral and ethical codes of behavior. The modern day dance world has gone a long way astray from such ideals and the inculcation of Yogic values such as Yama and Niyama can go a long way in bringing back such ideals in to the world of dance. This will stimulate modern dancers to have a second look at their decadent life styles and try to change for the better. The Yamas when practiced provide much mental solace and ethical strength to the dancers while the Niyamas produce the stoic qualities necessary for high-tension situations. The whole philosophy of Yoga can constitute a ‘touch stone’ for those who find themselves lost when the spotlight dims or shifts its focus to another performer. A more conscious and aware outlook of the whole phenomenon of human life on earth will make the dancer a more valuable member of the human social unit.

RIGHT ATTITUDE:

The regular practice of Yoga as a 'Way of Life' helps reduce the levels of physical, mental and emotional stress. This Yogic 'way of life' lays emphasis on right thought, right action, right reaction and right attitude. "To have the will to change that which can be changed, the strength to accept that which can not be changed, and the wisdom to know the difference" is the attitude that needs to be cultivated. An attitude of letting go of the worries, the problems and a greater understanding of our mental process helps to create a harmony in our body, mind whose disharmony is the main cause of 'Aadi – Vyadhi' or the psychosomatic disorders.

The practice of Pranayama helps to regulate our emotions and stabilize the mind, which is said to be as restless as a 'drunken monkey bitten by a scorpion'. Animals that breathe slowly are of less excitable nature than those that breathe rapidly and a similar observation holds true for humans. Even when we get angry, we can experience that our breathing becomes rapid and it is slower when we are cool and relaxed. Thus the slow, rhythmic and controlled breathing in Pranayamas leads to the emotional control seen in many Yoga Sadhaks.

BENEFITS OF DANCE FOR YOGA SADHAKAS

A true Yogi is neither an introvert nor an extrovert. He or she is an ambivert, a person who is equally at home irrespective of whether he is introspecting within himself or whether he is interacting vibrantly with the external environment. Therefore to make sure that the natural introversion of Yoga is balanced with healthy extroversion, some form of extroverted activity such as sports, music or art and craft skill need to be deliberately cultivated.

Dance provides a dynamic activity to offset the static activity of Yoga and many modern Yoga practitioners can benefit from such an associations.

Dance also provides a great source for emotional catharsis and this can help the Yoga Sadhaka to get over many of the emotional hang-ups that continue to bother them in his or her Sadhana.

MUDRA ACCORDING TO YOGAMAHARISHI DR SWAMI GITANANDA GIRI GURU MAHARAJ

Pujya Swamiji, Gitananda Giri Guru Maharaj, the codifier of the Rishiculture Ashtanga Yoga Paramparai was a world-renowned expert on Classical Yoga and his knowledge of the Yogic science of Mudra was unsurpassed. Here we present an extract from his book **MUDRAS** published by Satya Press, Ananda Ashram, Pondicherry.

THE NEURO - MECHANICS OF MUDRA:

The casual observer or the neophyte to Yoga may be easily led to believe that the beauty of the gesture, or the power of the esthete is that which evokes the Devatta, the Deva and the Devis, or that the entire procedure is entirely symbolical. Nothing could be farther from the truth.

There is a good basis for acceptance that the Mudra does control the mind-brain processes and the functions within the nervous system by uniting various nerve terminals of the sympathetic and para-sympathetic function. It is acceptable in neurology that the human nervous system is divided into aflex and reflex systems. The aflex carries afferent or sensory responses as well as efferent or motor responses. The reflex system is much like the grounding wire of any high voltage electrical system. A second function of the reflex system is that it feeds back to appropriate brain centres reflexogenic impulses that are associated with the modern concept of biofeedback. There are some 729 reflexes in the Yoga system. Modern Science has accepted some 222 of these reflexes. Mudra Yoga is a most exact science, emanating from our ancient Rishi Yoga culture.

In Yoga, the human body can be divided equally into ten distinct parts, five on each side of a median drawn directly through the centre of the body from the top of the head to the base of the spine and terminating in each of the digits of the toes and the fingers. The body can be further subdivided into ten Pranic areas, where one of the five major Pranic flows governs the head and others the chest, the abdomen, the pelvis and the extremities. Five minor Pranas are more subtly at the work within specific nerve areas.

The true use of Pranayama is to control these ten flows of Prana Vayu and the Prana Vahaka or nerve impulses, which move in the Nadis or nerves of the Pancha Kosha, the Five Bodies of Man.

When the fingers of the hands are united together in the Hastha Mudra, the specific nerves (as in Jnana Mudra) are united together in a closed nerve circuit. The fingers not in use represent an open nerve circuit. If the hands are united together (as in Namaskara Mudra), then the cranial nerve circuits of the head and the upper part of the body in the Pneumo-gastric or Vagus system are united together. If the hands are brought into alignment on the face (as in Yoni Mudra) then the Vagus nerves and the facial nerves are brought together in a closed circuit.

If the hands are united with the feet (as in Yoga Mudra) then the Vagus system is close-circuited with the cerebrospinal nerves.

When a posture like Parva Asana, the Past Posture, is used, all of the nerve systems of the body are thrown into turbulent action. Parva Asana is used by the Yogi to see into his past existences, to remember past lives. It is also sometimes called Purva Janma Mudra or Parva Mudra.

The purpose of the Hatha Yoga Asanas is to bring together these same nerve terminals, uniting them uniquely in the various postures to produce the specific effect of that posture. This is one good reason that Asanas, Kriyas and Mudras must be done correctly, otherwise the posture is a meaningless gesture, rather than that as understood in the inner teachings of Yoga, a concrete method to achieve Union.

MAJOR POINTS TO BE CONSIDERED IN MUDRAS ACCORDING TO YOGAMAHARISHI DR SWAMI GITANANDA GIRI GURU MAHARAJ

1. The Mudra is made complete by bringing together acupressure points at various sites on the human body. These Bindus are concerned with the pristine practice of Mudra. Yet, every Asana or Kriya is in some way a partial Mudra if these acupressure Bindus are brought into play. Particularly, this is to be noted in the practice of Hathaats, Hathenas, and the Hastikams in the Hatha Yoga system. This group of Asanas comes very close to being: Mudras.
2. The Mudra or gesture can act like a Kriya increasing or impeding circulation of the blood or lymph into various vital organs. Mudra can control every organ and function of the body and mind.

3. The Mudra moves energy through the physical nervous system of a bi-polar nature. This bi-polar nature is also inherent in the energy moving in the Pranamaya Kosha, the Vital Body. The Mudra helps to produce an electrical field around the Yogi, abundant in negative ions, producing a sense of well-being.
4. The Mudra extracts energy and substances from the nerves and vital bodies producing the various enzymes and hormones needed for vibrant health.
5. The Mudra creates a uni-polar base of energy in the Kanda, the Conus Medullaris at the base of the spinal cord. This uni-polar energy is popularly called “Kundalini Shakti”.
6. The Mudra converts enzymes and hormones into Ojas, purified autocoids, and Tejas, super-enzymes. The Mudra accomplishes Urdhwa Retas or a transmutation of lower substances and drives producing a Satchidananada Deha, an indestructible Yogic body.
7. The Mudra arouses and controls the Kundalini Shakti. Kundalini arousal without Mudra is madness.
8. The Mudra is itself a vehicle of total Union or Yoga. To a pious Hindu Yogi, the Mudra is no longer a gesture of Union, but is Union itself. The devotee becomes Shiva, or Shakti. “Verily, the Mudra is the Devi, even the Supreme Adept Himself ... Devi is Shakti, but the Mudra controls Her ... so Mudra is also the Supreme Shakta”.

ART OF MUDRAS ACCORDING TO KALAIMAMANI YOGACHARINI MEENAKSHI DEVI BHAVANANI

Yogacharini Meenakshi Devi Bhavanani is one of the few experts in the world who has the unique combination of more than 35 years of study, research and teaching experience in the fields of Yoga and Bharatanatyam . She is a member of numerous Central and State Government councils of Yoga and has trained thousands of dancers in the art of Natya Karanas. Here we reproduce an essay by her that is excerpted from her book, **YOGA: ONE WOMAN'S VIEW**, published by Satya Press, Pondicherry.

What are the means of communication, which are subtle, refined, and delicate beyond words? What means of communication exist which will not destroy the fragile relationship, the delicate emotion, the subtle thought? Even more important, how can the individual mind communicate with its own emotions, with its own body? Is there an intimate form of communication within the human structure itself? In India, a whole language grew up which was capable of expressing the subtlest spiritual truths, the most refined human emotions and thoughts without resorting to the gross vehicle of verbal communication, which alters any situation it expresses. That form of communication was called the Science of Mudra.

Broadly speaking, Mudra means a “gesture”. I can be a gesture of mind, (Manas Mudra); a gesture of the body (Kaya Mudra); a gesture of the hands (Hastha Mudra); a gesture of the feet (Pada Mudra); a gesture of the face (Mukha Mudra) or a gesture of the eyes (Chakshu Mudra).

Most humans unconsciously use “Mudras” constantly in their daily lives. They simply are unaware of it. Let us examine a few Mudras common to humanity throughout the world, “Mudras of the daily life”, so to speak.

“Body Talk” has become a popular cliché in “pop psychology” circles in the West. We unconsciously tell the world many things about ourselves, unconsciously communicate much of our real self to those around us; simply by the way we hold our body, our hands, our face, and our feet. The English expression “It was a gesture of good will,” indicates that we recognize that emotions can be “gestured”. Mentally we can “gesture” or “reach out” towards others with good thoughts or even bad ones, and this “gesture” has its power, depending upon the concentrative power of our mind at the time. This would be a Manas Mudra. We all know when we see someone with shoulders caved in that the person is dejected, or lacking confidence, just as we know that someone who walks with shoulders thrown back and straight and tall is filled with confidence. We know that someone who is constantly “fidgeting” or moving a body part unnecessarily is nervous and worried. These are all examples of unconscious “gestures” of the body, of Kaya Mudras.

Some common unconscious gestures of the hands (Hastha Mudras) include wringing of the hands when in great difficulty or trouble; showing the palm of the hand to another, a gesture asking the person to stop what he is doing; (this Mudra is used by traffic policemen all over the world);

putting the hand into a fist to show defiance and anger; gesturing the thumb up, with the remaining fingers closed into a fist to show approval. (In the ancient days, the gladiators in the Roman Coliseums depended upon this signal from the emperor to spare their lives).

Gestures of the feet are not so common in the shoe-clad West, but everyone knows what it means if someone “kicks” their foot at them. In the East it is considered a gesture of great disrespect to sit with the legs crossed at the knees when in the presence of someone who should be shown respect. It is also considered disrespectful to sit with the feet outstretched toward anyone. In the East, because it is customary to sit on the floor, the people are accustomed to many different positions of the feet, which have many meanings. This is the Pada Mudra. We are all also aware of gestures of the face (Mukha Mudras). We all know what a smile is and what a frown is, and what a grimace of disgust looks like or a hateful look. These are all common facial Mudras. The Chakshu Mudras, those gestures of the eyes, are much more subtle. Certainly most lovers are experts in the Chakshu Mudra, sending glances of love, of disappointment, of anger, of sorrow etc. The unconscious use of the various Mudras to communicate basic emotions, feelings and ideas is common throughout the human family. It is only in India, however, that this human phenomenon has been observed, codified, structured and refined into both a science and an art.

Mudra was elevated to the position of a carefully thought out science of cause and effect in the ancient discipline of Yoga, and refined to an exquisite form of communication in the ancient art of Bharat Natyam. The Hatha Yoga and Raja Yoga Systems of the ancient Hindus contain a wide repertoire of Pada Mudras, Hastha Mudras and Kaya Mudras. Although there are Chakshu Mudras and Mukha Mudras, their use is not so widespread as in, for example, the Bharat Natyam.

The Yogis in times past were fully aware of the flows of Prana or Vital Energy in the body, the effect of this Prana upon the human organism and its importance in all forms of life. The existence of Prana is a fact that even the greatest of modern scientists have yet to discover. Carl Sagan, well-known popularizer of scientific theories in the United States, recently stated that it appeared as though it was simply by chance adaptation to environmental conditions that the human body developed five fingers and five toes. The Yogi, who knows his own body inside out and its connection with the Universe, knows differently, and this is one of the basic principles as to why Mudras work as they do. The human has five fingers and five toes on each side of his body because he has five flows of Pranic energy, which terminate in each of the digits. There are five flows from head to foot on the right side, and five flows from head to foot on the left side. As well, there is a definite form of Prana circulating in the head, in the torso, in the stomach, in the pelvic area and in the extremities. These Pranic energies even have a name in Yogic terminology. Udana Prana circulates in the head; Prana Reflex in the chest; Samana in the digestive organs; Apama in the organs of elimination and Vyama in the organs of mobility (arms and legs). Bringing these various diverse flows of Pranic energy into closed circuits (“sealing” the energy flow) is one of the methods by which Mudra achieves its purpose.

Even the less sensitive human is fairly aware of the flow of energy off the hands and feet. This is why for ages immemorial holy men (men who had achieved some high level of energy within their human frame) have been able to “heal” by the “laying on of hands”. This also explains why we like to be touched by “high-energy”, positive people. They are transferring their surplus energy to us. It also explains why we shudder to be touched by negative, low energy people – they literally drain us of our energy. Normally we are losing energy through our hands and feet. It was discovered by the Yogis that joining hand to hand or hands to feet in various ways not only prevented that energy loss, but also helped build up the power of the nervous system, making it capable of handling the greater energy flows needed for (and produce by) “real” meditation. In Namaskar Mudra, for example (which, interestingly enough, is the hand position also used by Christians for prayer), the palm is placed against palm, and held against the region of the heart. In Yoga Mudra, the feet are crossed into Padma Asana, with right foot on left thigh, and left foot on right thigh, are palms of the hands placed on the soles of the feet. In many Yoga Asanas, the palms of the hands are placed into contact with the soles of the feet deliberately to create closed circuits.

Sometimes, various fingers are held together in particular positions, uniting one specific flow of Prana in a unique way with another, to produce a certain effect in the body. For example, a whole system of Mudras has been evolved which, when the fingers are held in a particular position, such as Chin Mudra, Chinmaya Mudra, Adhi Mudra and Brahma Mudra, the flow of air into specific areas of the low, mid, high and complete areas of the lungs respectively can be controlled. A Mudra used commonly for meditative and concentrative activities is the Jnana Mudra in which the tip of the thumb is united in a circle with the tip of the forefinger, and the other three fingers held rigidly straight the thumb represents the energy of the Atman (Universal Self; in physiological terms, the energy of the Central Nervous System or Sushumna Nadi) and the forefinger represents the energy of Jiva (individual self; in physiological terms, the right and left peripheral nerves or

the Ida and Pingala Nadi). In Yogic parlance, the energies of the individual self are united to the energies of the Universal Self and the high meditative state is achieved. The Hastha Mudra is both a symbolic, as well as a causative factor in producing that which it symbolizes. It sets the stage, so to speak, and points the way. It is the conscious, evolving aspect of mind speaking indirectly through the Mudras to the physiological function of the body, gesturing to the body the direction along which body energies should flow.

There are many such Hastha Mudras, each having its own particular effect upon the body, emotions, mind, nervous system and Pranic flow within the human organism, each Mudra carrying its own subtle message of evolution. Also in the Hatha Yoga repertoire are numerous Pada together in various positions in order to affect energy flows. Sometimes the feet are used as the vehicle of pressure to apply this pressure at a certain sensitive point in the body, producing the desired effect on the energy system.

Some Kaya Mudra (Body Mudras) include Yoga Mudra and Maha Mudra, but the most important of the Kaya Mudras in the Hatha Yoga system are the six Mudras known also as the Shat Mudras or the Oli Mudras. By placing the body into six distinct positions, using breath control and Bandhas as well, endocrine glands of the body are stimulated indirectly. Through this complicated series of body Mudras, the Tejas or firepower of the body (sexual energy) is transmuted into Ojas, or mental energy. This is a good example of how the higher mind speaks to the body through the medium of the Mudra. If the mind tried to verbally instruct the body to transmit Tejas into Ojas, the feat would be impossible. By placing the body into particular positions, controlling the breath in a particular way and using Bandhas, the Mudras acts as the communicative link between the higher mind's desire to create Ojas, and the body's ability to follow its direction. Thus, the Mudra becomes a subtle means of true communication between mind and body, a concrete way in which in which the body can implement the evolutionary commands of the mind. It is the special language uniting mind and body.

Whereas Mudras in Yoga is used mainly by the Yogi to communicate spiritually within himself and with the Universal Self, the Mudra in Bharat Natyam is used by the artist to subtle communicate with her audience, creating a Rasa – a particular emotional state – or stimulating the perception of a spiritual truth or feeling directly, from soul to soul, without the cloying, degrading effect of verbal contact. The Mudra in Yoga is an intra-personal communication, where via hand, foot and body positions, the mind can communicate to the body via energy or Pranic flows, its evolutionary commands. The Mudra in Bharat Natyam, however, is much more an inter-personal communications, a direct communion between artist and audience. Subtle emotions, spiritual truths that cannot be conveyed verbally, can be expressed via the trained glance of the eye, face, the position of the hands, the feet or the body.

Many of the Bharat Natyam, Mudras are also to be found in Yoga, as they are deeply rooted in the natural physical reaction of the nervous system to certain emotions and states of mind. For example, in Bharat Natyam a closed fist with the thumb up is called Shikara Mudra and is used to symbolize manifestations of the Divine Power – Lord Shiva Lord Vishnu etc. We have seen how in common usage the erect thumb position symbolizes triumph, success, "lordship" (compare the popular expression "thumb up"). This corresponds well to Yogic thinking where the thumb symbolizes the energies of the Higher Self, in physiological terms, the Sushumna Nadi. The Namaskara Mudra which literally gestures the meaning, "I witness that Supreme Force as manifesting in you" is common to both Yoga and Bharat Natyam, as is the Anjali Mudra, in which the Namaskara Mudra is lifted high over the head in a gesture of great respect to the higher authority, which could be God, Guru or King. The Jnana Mudra, the Gesture of Meditation in Yoga, is used also in Bharat Natyam to show the meditative state.

An interesting example of a Mudra for the dance, which is deeply rooted in neurological truths, is the Mudra used to depict the Rakshasha or the demon. We noted in the case of the Jnana Mudra, the Mudras of Meditation or Wisdom, that the thumb, which represents the Higher Consciousness, is joined to the forefinger, which represents the individual self, and the three remaining fingers which represent the Tanmatras (the eighteen senses of man) are held tightly straight and together in a controlled position. This represents a man in a meditative state. In the Mudra representing a Rakshasha, the forefinger is held against the base of the thumb, with the thumb stretched out, indicating that the individual self willfully refuses to join itself to the Supreme Consciousness. The other three fingers representing all the senses are played apart widely, indicating that the senses of the Rakshasha are out of control. Neurologically, the hand position well represents a devil, a Rakshasha, a man who stubbornly refuses to submit his individual will to the Divine Will and whose senses are uncontrolled. This same kind of analysis could be applied to many other Mudras of the Bharat Natyam.

Another class of hand positions is more graphic and descriptive, and recreates salient features of the action / emotion / thought expressed by simulating the outstanding characteristics of the action. These Mudras are more obvious, such as those used to suggest carrying a pot of water, stringing flowers into a garland, closing and opening a door, eating butter and so on. The Kaya Mudras, holding the body in a defiant stance, an amorous stance, etc., play their part in communicating ideas and emotions as well.

The Pada Mudras reinforce the work of the Kaya Mudras. Chakshu and Mukha Mudras are the vital link between Hastha, Pada and Kaya Mudras and the Rasa to be created in the audience. The skilled, trained dancer learns to communicate with her eyes and subtle gestures of face, using facial muscles, eyebrows, eyelids and mouth to convey her point. The most exquisite communication is achieved without uttering a single word. Of course, elaborate instrumental and vocal music and the collective cultural consciousness of the audience is also drawn upon to achieve the total effect. When that magic of shared spiritual insight and awareness occurs, as it often does in a Bharat Natyam recital, it is amazing to think that so much has been shared, so many emotions, so many thoughts, so many experiences with nary a word uttered by the artist or audience. The purifying and uplifting process of that type of artistic communion must be experienced to be understood.

Through the science of Mudra, that rare moment of perfect and pure communion and oneness can be achieved, whether uniting man with man in a high spiritual level of consciousness or uniting man with the Supreme Force in that fleeting moment of spiritual insight. The Mudra “gestures” the energy necessary and “seals” that otherwise intangible and illusive moment, fixing it for all time in our heart and nerves, bones and blood, mind and body, soul and thought – creating a solid foundation stones upon which to build a spectacular spiritual life.

The Mudra , that Divine gesture, “seals” into our very cells that , ‘Call to a Higher Life”, which can never again be denied!

CONCLUSION

The Upanishads say, “*Devo Bhutva Devam Yajet*” meaning – “Become a God in order to worship God.” India has always embodied this eternal principle in its culture and has spread it across the seas. Dancing was considered the religious ceremony most pleasing to the Gods and dedication of all activity to the Divine was the highest form of worship.

According to the Natya Shastra, “There is no wisdom, nor knowledge; no art nor craft; no device, nor action that is not to be found in Natya”.

Brahma, created the fifth Scripture, Natya Veda, the scripture of the Dance, presenting moral and spiritual truths in a form, which is easy to understand, even for the masses. Brahma then said to the people, “This art is not merely for your pleasure, but exhibits Bhava (emotion) for all the three worlds. I made this art to reflect this world, whether in work or play, profit, peace, laughter, battle or slaughter. This art shall teach men that the fruit of righteousness will be given to those who follow Dharma, the Moral Law. The spirituality of this art shall be a restraint for the unruly, a discipline for the followers of rule. It will create wisdom in the ignorant, learning in scholars, afford sport to kings and endurance to the sorrow-stricken. Replete with the diverse moods, informed with varying passions of the soul, linked to the deeds of all mankind, the best, the middling and the low, affording excellent counsel, and all else, this great art shall console and elevate the world”.

A distinctive feature of the Bharatanatyam is the fact that it conceives of movement in space mostly along either straight lines or in triangles or in circles, by which we gain a lot of energy. These movements are in actual act, moving lines, which come together in discernible patterns. These patterns reflect or mirror the Mandalas (mystic shapes or forms), which are associated with the six Chakras of the human psychic energy body (Sukshma Sharira, as it is termed in Yoga).

Bharatanatyam is no less a spiritual search than the Sanyasi’s way of renunciation. Yoga and Bharatanatyam are both a means by which “with body, mind and soul we may pray to the Divine.” These great arts help us to divinize ourselves, to develop spiritual qualities of loyalty, fidelity, a sense of Dharma, discipline, awareness, sensitivity, strength, courage, skill, cooperation, diligence, health, happiness and well being, serenity and peacefulness of mind.

May the artistic community of this great nation of Bharat strive to keep the purity of its great cultural heritage intact, inspiring people in all times to follow the advice of the great Rishi Veda Vyasa, who exclaimed at the end of his great epic, the Mahabharatha:

“Oh man know this! Do your Dharma (Ordained virtuous duty)! Then Artha (wealth) and Kama (fulfillment of desire) shall automatically come to you. Having fulfilled yourself in Artha and Kama, you will then seek and obtain Moksha! Hence I say, “Do your Dharma and all else shall come automatically to you.”

The great art of Bharat Natyam surely shows us how we may fulfill our Dharma in a most refined, pleasing, enjoyable, dignified, beautiful and joyful manner and attain that final union with the Supreme Self.

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