

Dance, Movement & Spiritualities
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Dancer – Dance – Spirituality: A phenomenological exploration of *Bharatha Natyam* and Contact Improvisation

ABSTRACT

This article explores the intersections between the dancer, forms of dance and emergent spiritual experience. It articulates different kinds of dancing experiences that are co-created while practicing two forms of dance: Bharatha Natyam (a classical Indian dance) and Contact Improvisation. Inquiry into the phenomenology of dancing reveals commonalities in the emerging spiritual experience, while also recognizing their distinctive techniques and artistic forms. The exploration suggests that the dance, dancer and emerging spiritual experience co-create each other within the process of dancing irrespective of its form. This exploration and inquiry also offers a descriptive language for what is spirituality in dance.

KEYWORDS

Bharatha Natyam
Contact Improvisation
spirituality
attunement
resonance
emergent process

This article explores the intersections between the dancer, forms of dance and emergent spiritual experience. Emphasis is on understanding the 'lived and experienced' (Ramaswamy 2012: 19) dancing phenomenon described by dancers, rather than suggesting an irrefutable argument to support a preferred hypothesis.

Conventionally defined, spirituality relates to 'the human spirit or soul as opposed to material or physical things' (Oxford Dictionaries n.d.). This basic understanding of spirituality tends to cleave from the physical that which is deemed spiritual. However, embodied experiences like dancing challenge such binary and sharp distinctions. Dancing experiences emerge at the confluence of both internal and external factors, such as the physical space, musical accompaniment (when present), a dancer's attitude and emotional state, audience participation, etc. A phenomenological exploration can help disclose the multiple influences that affect a dancer's experience of dancing, including the emergence of a specific type of experience that could be construed as spiritual. Furthermore, the exploration of contrasting forms of dance renders possible the discovery of common, perhaps overarching, patterns present across forms. In other words, could it be that an experience that is embodied in the dancer transcends both the dancer and the form of dance in co-creating an expansive space infused with spiritual energy?

Phenomenological exploration is 'grounded in actual human experience' (Mruk 1983: 141) and its strength is to 'show qualitative differences' without attempting to quantify and measure (Giorgi 1985: 6). This article describes two dancers' perspectives on their dancing experience, as shaped by their unique life path. Their life unfolding is best rendered in narrative form; a 'context-rich mode' of expression that includes 'spatial and temporal ordering of experience' (Deslauriers 1992: 187), disclosing the breadth and plurality of an experience (Braud 1998).

The narratives contrast a traditional dance form with a contemporary one in order to tease out the role of form as a portal to spiritual experiences. *Bharatha Natyam* is a classical dance style from southern India that traces its origin to an extant theatrical dance form called *natya*. The form of *natya* is described in the *Natyasastra*, a treatise that is dated between the second century BCE and second century CE (Kumar 2006: xvi). Contact Improvisation (CI) is a contemporary dance form that originated in the US in the 1970s. It can be practiced either as a stage performance or as a type of social dance. It uses the contact between the dancers as the entry point of movement improvisation.

In the process of co-creating this article, we (as authors) engaged in a series of extensive dialogues about our respective experiences. An early insight led us to consider the dancing body as a vehicle for embodied attunement and resonance. This realization spurred the following questions: how does the form of dance create this resonance space? Are we, as dancers, simply tuning into a resonance space? And what is the role of intention in creating a physical manifestation of this potential resonance space? What is the relevance of form for the dancer? And for the onlooker?

Our dialogue put into question the very nature of spirituality as enacted in dancing, in particular how dance may expand the confines of a person's interiority or subjectivity. With an understanding that the dancer, dance and experience coexist in a potential spiritual space, the narratives explore the role of these elements in the hope of better understanding how the attunement of an individual dancer within a particular dance form can lead to an emergent spiritual experience. In the discussion, readers are invited into a similar

exploration of spirituality in dance through the meaning-making of the various stories shared.

DANCER – BHARATHA NATYAM

Dance found me (Aparna) as a 5-year-old girl growing up in Chennai, a city in southern India. I was immersed in a culture with diffuse boundaries between dance, music, religion, societal practices and traditional ways of living. My mother's religious values, as well as being surrounded by a city filled with religious fervour and ritualistic practices, surely influenced my childhood experiences. I was a reluctant dancer who missed after-school playtime, spending it instead under the watchful gaze of my dance teacher who believed in repetitive learning. I would position myself at a vantage spot in class, so that I could look out the window at events that seemed far more engaging than the tedious repetition of a foot movement. While this may have frustrated and even angered my teacher, it developed in me an ability to dance with minimal conscious thought or effort. Perhaps this is my earliest memory of meditation in dancing!

Looking back, I realize how unique it was to be a dancer, especially in a young Indian society where dance had been hitherto practiced by *devadasi* (one who served God), who were dedicated to temples and danced ceremonially during worship of the deity (Gaston 1982: 6–12). A *devadasi* was commonly a young girl, married to the deity enshrined in temples, and was not permitted to marry another, have children or engage in household life. In southern India, her dance was called *sadir* and *dasiyattam* during the seventeenth to nineteenth century CE (Vatsyayan 1974: 23). Society at the time looked upon *devadasi* as prostitutes (Apffel-Marglin 1985; Kothari 1982: 13) – a tarnish that has slowly faded in the past hundred years. Around 1920 CE, the Devadasi Bill passed by Indian legislature discontinued *devadasi* employment by the temple, and their dancing became dormant until pioneers like Rukmini Devi revised it into present-day *Bharatha Natyam* (Kothari 1982: 28).

FORM OF BHARATHA NATYAM

Several centuries ago in India, there was a theatrical form called *natya* that included dance, music and drama (Rangacharya 1986: 3). *Bharatha Natyam*, a descendant of this extant form of *natya*, is presently practiced in southern India as an interpretive storytelling dance form narrating mythology, history and religious stories. The form of *Bharatha Natyam* includes percussive stamping of the feet, graceful movements of the arms, expressive hand gestures, vigorous eye movements that seek to communicate the emotional experience of the songs, poems and words in music. While its form is distinct from other classical Indian dance styles, they share the essence of *natya*: to evoke an aesthetic experience (or *rasa*), in the audience (Vatsyayan 1968: 9).

The various forms of classical Indian dances have diverged over the past several centuries in response to historical, geopolitical and social influences in different parts of India. For instance, northern India was once ruled by the Mughal dynasty, who practiced Islam. *Natya*, which had hitherto danced religious stories about Hindu gods, adapted by emphasizing rhythm, and over time evolved into a distinctive dance form known as *Kathak*, which embodies the rhythmic richness of Indian dance. Similarly, other dance forms emphasized specific elements of *natya* that were popular and relevant to

their community. Each dance form showcased one or more essential aspect of *natya* in their particular form, drawing aspects from the form of *natya* that included rhythmic dance, singing and spoken lines (as in a play), poetry, expressive mime and theatrical acting. In addition to this, the dancing clothes and accessories were reflective of regional handicrafts; the spoken language in music was a regional dialect; and the stories were specific to that particular geographic region. The dance form of *Bharatha Natyam* does not use spoken words – instead it interprets the words in the songs. The accessories, language, musical instruments, style of music (Carnatic music) are specific to the southern state of Tamilnadu in India.

SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE IN BHARATHA NATYAM

Bharatha Natyam has been (for me) a form that supports and creates a spiritual experience of oneness. *Bharatha Natyam* has been my yoga – *natya* yoga. In *Bharatha Natyam*, (and other practices of *natya*), when a dancer steps into an experience of another, the emergent state of oneness is yoga (Ramaswamy 2012: 235). When this experiential state of yoga is shared in dance, it evokes a corresponding experience of resonance (*rasa*) in the engaged onlooker. This dance between yoga and *natya* – *natya* yoga – is a dancing expression and experience that transcends the physical self.

The original form of *natya* is described as when the performer/actor does not ‘act a role, portray a character, imitate or pretend’ to feel an emotion; it is when the actor steps into the experience and ‘dance[s]’ the character (Ghosh 1967). *Bharatha Natyam*, as an exemplar of *natya*, is a dancing process of creating oneness; a feeling of being one with the emotions of another. This connection is yoga. The Sanskrit word *yoga* is derived from the root word *yuj*, which means to connect and to serve as a yoke (Feuerstein 2003). While the connection can be within one’s own self (mind and body), yoga is commonly understood to be oneness or union between self and cosmic other (Yogananda 1997: 322). *Bharatha Natyam* as *natya* yoga leads to an inner dancing experience of oneness, and also invites the onlooker (audience) into this space of oneness.

RHYTHMIC ATTUNEMENT AND SYNCHRONY

Bharatha Natyam has sophisticated rhythmic movements (*nritta*) along with nuanced expressive dancing (*abhinaya*), both of which require diligence and perseverance in mastering the basic techniques. Rhythmic dancing brings together percussion and melody in juxtaposing precise feet stamping with fluid arm and upper body movements. It is both a dancing response and an artistic expression of the percussive beats and melodic notes in music. During practice sessions, a student rehearses movements and expressive sequences to ensure accuracy in dancing and synchrony in coordination to the music. As a performing dance style, it is more common to see solo dancers, and primarily women and younger girls. Thematic group presentations drawing on mythology are also popular in *Bharatha Natyam*. This article seeks to emphasize the perspective of a solo dancer’s spiritual experience in dancing.

My performing career began at the age of thirteen, when my guru presented me in my debut solo dance performance. I danced a repertoire of eight dances, ranging from purely rhythmic to entirely expressive, with some dances a judicious blend of both. The dances are choreographed with care in a deliberate manner to showcase not only the dancer’s talent, but also

that particular genre of dancing. A performance repertoire is well rehearsed to ensure synchrony between music and dancing. Traditionally, music is a live accompaniment to dance; however, dancers nowadays use pre-recorded music for ease of presentations. An orchestra is well rehearsed in the rendition of songs and rhythmic patterns so as to ensure synchrony with dancing. The element of improvisation is incidental and not an anticipated part of dance performances.

A dancer's body is attuned over years of dedicated practice to master the artistry and techniques of rhythmic movements. While there are precise rules that guide each genre of movement, the overarching purpose is to cultivate coordination, synchrony and harmony in dancing. A seminal Indian dance text, *Abhinaya Darpana*, states: 'where the hand goes the eyes should follow, where the eyes go the mind follows, where the mind goes emotion arises, where there is emotion *rasa* is evoked' (Coomaraswamy and Duggirala 1987: 17). While different Indian dance styles embody this principle in unique forms, the aesthetic essence of rhythmic body movement (*nritta*) is central to each form.

Video link to dance demonstration of simple movements and hand gestures by Aparna Ramaswamy <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AZqcFqBLTgM>

A student of *Bharatha Natyam* spends several years developing their lower body strength to enable them to hold a firm posture even while moving at varying speeds. When the teacher deems the body ready to learn more, the student is taught to use arms while continuing to maintain lower body precision and posture. At this point, the student learns to coordinate their eyes and hands so as to build an increased capacity to concentrate on various parts of the body, and thus work towards further synchrony and balance. This process of attunement continues over several years, even while the student starts learning expressive dancing. During this time, a dancer practices rhythmic precision that brings together physical body and mind while synchronized to the melody and rhythm in music. A dancer develops the comfort of dancing whereby movements flow with ease. It creates an ability to dance in a meditative state, where awareness is heightened and intensive attention is not expended on any one aspect of dancing. Thus attention is expansive and dancing is a fluid response to music.

A similar and deliberate process of attunement emerges while performing for an audience. An introductory (and often invocatory) dance introduces the dancer to the audience, and vice versa. The first dance (*Alaripu*) 'invites the dancer to sense the physical dancing hall [while dancing] [...] [and] attempt synchrony with the music, even as the musicians are going through their own individual and collective process of synchrony with music, audience and dancer' (Ramaswamy 2012: 195–96). The dancer begins an attunement process – within self, with the music, and the audience – one that is specific to that dancing hall. There is acute awareness of the physical space with regards to position on stage, volume and synthesis of music, intensity of stage lights, view of the audience, physical body sensation of warming up in dance, etc. At the end of this first dance, the dancer's introduction to the audience, stage and music ideally leads to their comfort and familiarity with performing dance.

Video link to dance demonstration of Alaripu by Aparna Ramaswamy <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pQ06t61K6MI>



Figure 1: Aparna Ramaswamy demonstrating mudra in expressive dancing – writing a letter.



Figure 2: Aparna Ramaswamy demonstrating mudra in expressive dancing – spotting a bee on a flower.

A second dance (*Jathiswaram*) emphasizes rhythmic beats inherent in melodic notes. A first-hand description of this dance follows:

My experience [...] was an increased appreciation of melody, as it expressed itself through my body movements. My experience was one of synchrony expressed by the rhythm of my feet and the percussive drumming in music. I was less conscious [...] of the physical surroundings-less concerned about expression and audience engagement.

(Ramaswamy 2012: 196)

A dancer begins the process of attunement within oneself and with music, as expressed in dancing. As a dancer becomes more attuned, there is a heightened sensitivity and awareness of how the form of dance manifests in the dancer's body. While the dancer's body movements flow with ease, reflecting attunement developed over years of practice, a different kind of attunement emerges at that precise performing moment: an attunement with an audience, space and music specific to that moment in time. In *Bharatha Natyam*, a dancer's attunement over time enables ease in attuning to varying audiences, music and dancing spaces.

Video link to dance demonstration of *Jathiswaram* by Aparna Ramaswamy <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IHvPB4vMFyM>

A third dance (*Varnam*) is often the centrepiece in a *Bharatha Natyam* repertoire. The role of a dancer is that of a narrator interpreting a poem from

the perspective of the main character. A dancer steps back and forth into the roles of narrator and character while retaining the identity of a dancer. The dancer's ability to straddle multiple perspectives with fluidity seems to emerge spontaneously with years of dedicated dancing, in which the emphasis is on authentic experience and its empathic expression. The poems are often several hundred years old, describing a heroine who lived during a different society in another time. A dancer need not have personal life experiences that parallel a character's emotional experience – and seldom does. A dancer's ability to step into experiences that transcend personal life experiences indicates a dancer's willingness (and openness) to emergent experiences. While the techniques of expression (*abhinaya*) are taught in dance, a dancer's ability to step into the emotional experience of another in dance seems to be an outcome and emergence from the years-long attunement process. A dancer's understanding of a character's emotions is learned; however, a dancer's experience of a character's emotions is not taught – it is an emergence that is sensitive to the dancer's attunement, dedication, intention and openness to experience an emotion. Such experiential and expressive dancing evokes an aesthetic appreciation (*rasa*) in an onlooker – an essential purpose in *natya*.

Video link to dance demonstration of varnam by Aparna Ramaswamy <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PRG0Y49wRc0>

RESONANCE AND ONENESS

Several expressive dances follow the centrepiece dance (*varnam*). Such experiential and expressive dances in *Bharatha Natyam* are interpretive storytelling dances enacting descriptive poems. The descriptions are often in the form of a dialogue between two people, even if only one of the two has a role to play; the other's presence is demonstrated by the interactive responses of the dancer. Occasionally, a dancer will switch roles between the characters to better interpret the poet's words. When interpreting the poem, the sole purpose is to understand, experience and express the poet's perspective as indicated by the words in the poem. When experiencing the emotion, a dancer surrenders to an emerging emotion that may not be resourced from personal life experience. The dancer:

[...] moves beyond the overt expression of words in the song, and depicts the meaning behind the words. The focus is on experiencing the character's emotional state in an authentic manner so that it expresses naturally and audience resonate with the depicted experience.

(Ramaswamy 2012: 200)

For example, in the expressive dance genre of *padam*, a poem's heroine laments to her friend 'I don't know what to do. Please listen [...] please help'. Prior to dancing this poem, a dancer has to understand the personality and emotional mindset of the poet's heroine. With compassion and empathy, a dancer enters the dance to become one with the heroine, and feels her helplessness, agitation and frustration.

Through her interactive expressions in the dance, a dancer also conveys the friend's attitude as she listens to the heroine. In the process of experiencing and expressing the entirety of the dialogue, a dancer places herself within the conversation and dances from the heroine's experience. This ability

to step into an experience that transcends present time and space may also go beyond any limitations set by the poet's words and perspective. While based on an understanding of the poem's descriptions, a dancer's experience of the heroine transcends it; for example, a dancer can cry the tears of a heroine, even if they have not been described in the poem. This transcendence is especially pronounced in devotional dances such as *bhajan*.

When a poem is devotional, the dialogue is often between a human self (*jivatma*) and a cosmic other (*paramatma*). A dancer has to understand the nuances of how the poet has conceived such a devotionally charged dialogue prior to dancing. With an empathic and devotional mindset, a dancer steps into the devotee's experience as described in the poem. The emotion in such devotional poems is *bhakti* – devotional love for the Other. It 'creates an experiential knowing of complete self surrender [...] of being enveloped in and by the emotional energy of *bhakti*' (Ramaswamy 2012: 201). The experiential response is not only to the words – primarily because it may not be a language understood by the dancer; the response is to the emotional energy of music accentuated by the dancer's resonance with the devotee's *bhakti*. For example, the words may be a devotee asking of the Other: 'Why do you tease me with such illusions and games? Don't you know I have none but you in my heart?' Besides expressing the poem's words, a dancer resonates with the emotional pleadings of the human self with the cosmic Other. In this resonance, a second spiritual dialogue emerges. While the poet's devotee pleads and prays for a specified reason, the fervour is often part of dialogues between our self and cosmic Other.

A dancer's ability to synthesize the emotional experience of the devotee and the spiritual experience that transcends the poem implies an emergence that goes beyond form, words and emotions in dance. At this confluence and emergence, dancer and dance become co-creators of an experience that is physically embodied and spiritually experienced; a space of oneness and resonance. At this confluence and emergence, the external form of *Bharatha Natyam* creates a meditative oneness for the dancer; a state of resonance within the self and with another. This embodiment of form, leading to inner experiences and their external expression, suggests an interdependency whereby form acts as the scaffolding in creating experience, which then transforms into a container for the emergent experiences.

DANCING PARTNER

Bharatha Natyam is often a solo dance performance, where the dancing partner is the audience. As an exemplar of *natya*, an essential intent in *Bharatha Natyam* is to evoke *rasa* in audience members. The twin processes of attunement and resonance create and sustain a spiritual experience of oneness between dancer and dance. Furthermore, a parallel twin process invites attunement and resonance between dancer, dance and audience members. When a dancer is attuned and resonant with dance, it is yoga; when the dance creates attunement and resonance in another, it is *natya*.

In any audience group, only some members are likely to experience this attunement and resonance. Such a sensitive audience member is called a *sahridaya* – one who is capable of resonance with an emotional experience in dancing. When such a resonance emerges, their aesthetic experience is called *rasa*. This emotional experience (*rasa*) by a *sahridaya* is likened to a spiritual and mystical experience described in yoga (Vatsyayan 1996: 145–47).

Abhinavagupta, an authoritative commentator on *natya*, defined it as the 'intuitive experience of *rasa*' (Pande 1997: 17). Scholars who preceded Abhinavagupta speculated on where *rasa* resided: if *rasa* was in the archetype of the character, or in the dancer's abilities, or in the poem, or elsewhere. After much debate on whether *rasa* – an aesthetic experience of resonance – exists on the inside or outside, scholars proposed that *rasa* 'is a triumvirate experience shared' by the poet, actor/dancer and a sensitive audience (Appa-Rao and Rama-Sastry 1967: 19). My experience of dancing *Bharatha Natyam* suggests that the form of this dance creates an experience of resonance and oneness within a dancer; oneness within a receptive audience member; and oneness between dancer, dance and audience.

DANCER – CONTACT IMPROVISATION

I (Daniel) first came to Contact Improvisation in the early 1980s, when it entered the vibrant contemporary dance scene in Montreal, Québec. Students would gather around teachers/dancers/choreographers who organized workshops for other dancers and the general public. Eventually, I left contemporary dance to train in traditional Balinese dance at the University of Montreal, where I was studying psychology. I continued this training in Bali and in San Francisco, where I moved in 1989. After a long hiatus, I returned to Contact Improvisation in 2011, prompted by an internal calling; first by participating in conscious dance events around San Francisco, and then by joining regular workshops and 'jams'. This time I was returning as a researcher and scholar of enaction (Bruner 1966: 11; Noe 2004: 1). The study of enaction postulates that a natural form of knowledge is acquired by doing and interacting with the world. The rich knowledge constructed on action is based on the coordination of our various senses; but since action also changes the world, enaction is recursively self- and world-constituting (Malkemus 2012: 215). Enactive knowledge includes kinaesthetic proprioception, which is central to dance, and the wide range of feelings and emotions that give rise to 'what it feels like' to experience something. Such felt sense is at the root of our metaphysical intuition about the world. From an enactive perspective, dancing – beyond its artistic and physical dimensions – became for me the occasion to inquire into movement as embodied knowing.

WHAT IS CONTACT IMPROVISATION?

Contact Improvisation (CI) is performed in duet or larger groups, in relative silence, and without the rhythmic or melodic support of music. Dancers support each other's weight and use momentum to move in concert with their partner(s). The movements, unrehearsed and improvised, emerge from the physical interplay between the dancers: 'Interest lies in the ongoing flow of energy rather than on creating still pictures [...]. The dancers in Contact Improvisation focus on the sensation of touching, leaning, supporting, counterbalancing, and falling with other people, thus carrying a physical dialogue' (Novak 1990: 8).

Historically, Contact Improvisation finds its origins in the work of contemporary dancer Steve Paxton. It emerged from within the artistic countercultural ferment of the 1960s and early 1970s, as part of contemporary dance exploration. The originator and earlier practitioners decided that it would be best not to codify the form (Stark Smith 2006). There are no centrally sanctioned training programmes. Instead, a social and artistic movement grew organically, where experienced dancers initiate others in the form in an open-ended manner.

Nowadays, Contact Improvisation groups form a loose-knit community, with regular workshops, retreats, conferences and jams offered internationally, as well as a journal, websites, social networks and visual documentation online.

In many urban areas, regular classes are open to both beginners and experienced dancers. These are often followed by 'jams' – a musical term applied to dance in keeping with the spirit of improvisational exploration. While classes are structured around the directives given by the teacher, a jam is, in contrast, an open space bound by the clear but loosely held mutual intention of the participants. Dancers congregate on the dance floor. Warming stretches and solo dances organically give rise to movement duets or group improvisation. While some may enter the jam as a couple, most enter the space as solo dancers who eventually find and change partners during the jam. Contact may be fleeting and last only a few seconds, or the improvisers may (silently) agree to explore for longer periods, ranging from a few minutes to hour-long sessions. No music entrains the movements and the partners co-create their own rhythm. Fast paced duets occur side-by-side with slow meditative ones. While Contact Improvisation has developed a movement vocabulary and techniques, perhaps the single most important organizing factor in jams is the willingness to experiment with those present.

SPIRITUALITY AND CONTACT IMPROVISATION

Contact Improvisation was created in a secular environment of physical experimentation. Spiritual experience is not the focus of the dance and was not spoken about in any of the classes that I have attended. Yet, the cultural set can be construed as open-ended, participatory and democratic. Egalitarian values are espoused and traditional roles (around gender, teachers and students; performers versus non-performers) are put into question. Even if spiritual exploration is not the expressed object of the dance, its import may be unstated rather than absent. I noticed that my dancing experience felt imbued with strong psychological and spiritual meaning. When I queried them on the subject of spirituality, other dancers generally corroborated some connection between CI and spirituality.

For me, Contact Improvisation started to act as a root metaphor (Browning and Cooper 2004: 22; Ricoeur 1976: 64) for my life; that is, it became a central means of inquiry into spiritual reality. In particular, CI became the occasion to experiment and practice:

- radical self-acceptance, and the readiness to meet experience as it is, as opposed to pre-established notion of how it should be;
- deep trust in the flowing nature of life, trust in others as partners;
- mindful awareness of body in space, as it is felt as a liberatory vehicle;
- authenticity;
- mutuality in connection and in movement dialogue with another.

I noticed that the outcomes of the dance also took on what could be construed as spiritual overtones: deep joy, feelings of oneness and deep interconnectedness with others, increased vitality and a sense of renewal. Furthermore, with the keen knowledge of my own fledgling skills, entering a 'jam' space was an act of courage, again serving as a metaphor for the improvisational quality of life itself.

In the absence of a codified teaching format, teachers approach their classes as a means to focus awareness on a particular aspect of the dance form.



*Figure 3: Stephanie Nugent (centre left) and Claire Kimmel (upper right).
Photographer: Serge Gubelman.*

Each course is a kind of body meditation that engages the gravitational and physical dynamics of the moving body. Teachers usually propose a theme; those that I have encountered include:

- readiness (to fall, to extend contact, etc.);
- sharing (points of contact, centre of gravity, weight, etc.);
- directionality (of movement);
- tensional integrity (in one's own physical structure, and in the structure co-created by dancers coming into contact);
- pathways (of movements and in a multidirectional space);
- tone (muscular tonality, hypertonicity and release);
- rides and lifts (learning how use momentum to lift one's partner).

Each of these themes in turn becomes a gateway for increased awareness into one's own body. Many classes devote time to duets to be executed as 'performance'. This may be a way to train dancers to be comfortable as performers, and it trains participants to become active viewers, as teachers often elicit verbal description of what we 'see' in a performance or have felt during our own.

CONTACT AS A PORTAL FOR RESONANCE

In CI, resonance is one of the primary goals of the form. Beyond the purely performative aspect of the dance, which can be enjoyed by onlookers, the main focus of resonance is between the dance partners. The beauty of the

dance, and its spiritual impact on the dancers, are in part the outcomes of deep listening and sharing between the dancers. Novak (1990: 152) speaks of this as a 'strong sense of communion' between her and her partner, even if they were dancing together for the first time. This was the case she writes, when 'rapport had been established in the dance – that is, if the movement with my partner seemed fairly mutual in direction, momentum, and timing so that it felt as though the dance had moved us' (1990: 152).

I came to understand that the emphasis in CI is on joining the flexibility of one's bodily structure – readying oneself with nimble limbs, joints and spine – with the boundless and potential movements that are afforded by touch, weight sharing and the momentum that is stored and released by the dynamics of contact. When this joining happens, it is as if movement is directed from a third place; not originating exclusively in me or the other, but neither separate altogether of me or the other. It is more than 'both at once', as this could also characterize a highly choreographed and rehearsed *pas de deux*; rather, improvisation injects a shifting indeterminacy that brings an element of surprise, and which puts the dancer face-to-face with the unknown.

Improvisation and the unknown can be very unsettling, especially in a performative art. In my experience, this freedom acts as its own set of constraints: it requires experience, discipline and particular qualities from the dancer. It is in this context that CI becomes a means to practice radical acceptance. In its self-reflexive form – radical self-acceptance – CI invites me to be wakeful to what is happening in my body; my desire to move authentically within the limits of my skills while stretching them. It also means to put self-care first, being ready to fall at any moment; a critical and mutually held heuristic if one is to avoid injury. In its relational form, accepting what is presented in the moment during the dialogical contact with my partner(s) has meant practicing non-resistance in the midst of unusual pathways. Radical acceptance also invites me to embrace the evanescent nature of the dance, moving away from grasping or manipulating. It also poses a particular paradox: dancers need to gain proficiency in order to engage in the form to its fullest. On the one hand, the dance expresses a kind of perfection of the moment that reflects particular enactments. On the other, the intentional stance of acceptance differs widely from an 'anything goes' attitude. The co-created resonant space is not always successful or satisfactory from a performative perspective, especially if the dancers are out of sync. Acceptance means to be able to learn from all situations and mistakes.

The level of skills expressed by dance partners can give rise to different degrees of resonance. As with other dance forms, practice enables one to achieve a more refined degree of resonance. The basic skills in contact are cultivating a keen state of awareness, focusing on weight and touch and 'learning to be disoriented' (Novak 1990: 153). Additional skills follow from that state when interacting with another: how to fall, to roll, to invert one's body; to lift and be supported; how (and when) to yield and release the body; to know one's centre of gravity; to judge another's structural integrity; how to soften or stiffen the body depending on the situation; how to sense someone's skill level; how to invite others; and how to communicate clear boundaries.

APPROACHING THE UNKNOWN: EXPERIENCE OF ATTUNEMENT IN CI

A beginner will ask: 'How do I enter a jam space?' The experience can be jarring for those who don't have much experience. How does one connect, let alone dance, flowingly with a dance partner, sometimes a total stranger,



Figure 4: Nitipat Ong Pholchai (kneeling) and Leslie Castellano. Photographer: Serge Gubelman.

without verbal agreement? How does attunement take place between partners? A subtle, or sometimes quasi-instinctual negotiation takes place whereby a partner may approach another doing solo movement, tune in to the other, negotiate a mode of entry and get a sense of the degree of skills. When contact occurs by happenstance, such as when dancers bump or merge with each other on the dance floor, attunement is pre-empted by accidental or quasi-accidental contact. But in each case, contact will either be received or not, and the sharing of boundaries will be negotiated.

Thus in CI, resonance is not something that can be produced without some intentional preliminaries. Since physical contact is the premise of the form, the act of contacting itself requires proper attunement with oneself (self-attunement) and one's dancing partner(s) (contact attunement). This, in turn, requires refining the awareness of one's body so that one becomes increasingly ready and skilful to tune into the other. Each partner's body shape, individual movement style, levels of skills and attitudinal set afford unique pathways of movement, and so does each moment of contact. So while more proficient dancers may be attuned to and ready to unfold a larger range of movements, a beginner may find value and meaning from the very beginning.

In order to achieve resonance in the dance, the refinement process necessitates cultivating awareness and attention. Contact Improvisation shares commonality with the two main forms of contemplative practices: focused attention (or concentrative) meditation and open-presence meditation (Lutz, Dunne and Davidson 2007: 517). Just as in focused attention meditation – where the meditator is trained to keep the focus on a particular object (e.g. one's breath, a mantra or inner or outer sound, a devotional icon, or inner image) – CI trains the person to pay attention to the finest kinaesthetic and proprioceptive sensations. Moreover, just as one does in open-presence meditation – where the focus is on paying attention to any spontaneous arising in the field of awareness – CI attunes the dancers to be present to the

open field of potentiality of movement in space. Novak speaks of the importance of both forms of awareness infusing the learning experience she had with numerous teachers:

[A]lthough they used different approaches to sensory preparation, the development of internal awareness always constitutes a part of the class. Through this work, I gained a better ability to concentrate and focus on weight and touch; at the same time, by practicing the form, I could feel that my body was also becoming trained in the spiraling pathways which contribute to an ongoing flow of movement of two bodies in contact. [...]. My efforts to learn sometimes led me to attempt to control the movement, to make events occur [...]. If I or my partner became consciously manipulative, the dance seemed frustrating. On the other hand, concentrating entirely on sensation produced a very limited kind of contact improvisation, instructive and fascinating to practice, but finally monotonous and without dynamic range.

(Novak 1990: 152–53)

In my dance, I found that resonance has a tangible edge because it arises from the meeting of my body with another's. It has also an intangible aspect, since it requires tuning to another's awareness in order to release myself in the flow of the dance. I have felt also that my skill level can be entrained by dancing with a more proficient dancer, as if it were easier to experience lifting or being lifted, surrendering safely or to simply finding myself in new pathways that I never imagined possible.

A particular experience comes to mind. During an evening dance event, I approached a man that I had never met. He was taller than I, very muscular, and by our initial meeting I could sense that he was also expertly directive. I felt that I could trust to lean onto him. However, what I thought would be a simple leaning became a series of complex lifts, something that I had seen others perform (often female dancers are the ones being lifted by male counterparts). There was something totally liberating in the moment that is very hard to put in words. I felt 'moved' in more ways than one, as I allowed myself to give in totally to the swirling motions. I could sense with every move how my mind was dropping all the 'what are you doing dancing with another man?!', 'what are you doing taking on the "female" part?!' and many other conditioned thoughts of the same kind, in order to allow for the improvisation to be just what it is: two moving bodies expressing and enjoying a mutual expression of the limits of what we could do, without even exchanging one word before it all began. The sense of time seemed to disappear. The improvisation lasted what seemed an eternity, but in real time it was probably no more than four or five minutes. And, as customary is in a dance jam, we just parted ways to continue dancing on our own.

In this example, attunement and resonance are almost simultaneous emergent processes – one building on the other in a rapid sequence. Surrendering to the mutuality and emergent trust allows a different level of resonance to be created – one which is reciprocated by the partner. Afterward, we briefly chatted on the sidelines. I shared my amazement with him and complimented him on his skills. He told me that he had an incredible experience as well: 'Very few men allow themselves this experience!' He pointed out that he could sense that I knew where my centre of gravity was at every moment in the swirls. His remarks were extremely helpful for me to cognize a skill I was

more or less taking for granted. Physically, our ‘centre of gravity’ is essentially an abstract point. It does not exist in a static place; rather it constantly changes with every move. One can’t pinpoint it prior to any movement, as it is enacted at every passing moment.

RESONANCE FOR OTHERS

From the very beginning, Contact Improvisation has been extended as performance, linking dancers to viewers. When CI is done as a performance for the viewing pleasure of others, resonance may be sought with the audience. Techniques that come to define the movement vocabulary of CI – around weight sharing, falling and spiral flow – have also been incorporated in other types of dance performance and dance experimentation. However, the more a piece becomes choreographed, the more its relationship to CI may be called to question as, at its core, CI is about achieving improvised and ever-renewed pathways *between* partners.

Dance jams for their part have continued to be places of exploration. Within this space, dancers shift from being performers (i.e. when they are on the dance floor) to being onlookers (i.e. when they watch from the sides). By observing how other dancers explore and push the limits of the form, one gets acquainted with a wide range of pathways. As an onlooker, watching the creative pathways that other dancers create has been for me a subtle way to commune with them. I may follow a duet intensely for several minutes, carefully immersing myself into the dance, letting myself be surprised by the choices that are expressed. I often notice a kind of sympathetic joy: I will openly laugh or express amazement when movements evoke humour or are particularly stunning because of the level of trust and skills that are in display.

ACROSS DANCE FORMS: CONFLUENCE AND EMERGENCE

This article has explored how there is an emergence of co-created spiritual experiences in the confluence of the dancer and form of dance: experiences that are physically embodied as attunement, synchrony and harmony; and experiences that also manifest as subtle awareness, resonance and oneness. We invite you (the reader) to dance with us as we take a step back to look at what has emerged from our dialogues and merge our voice as dancers.

When I (a dancer) step into a stylized form (such as *Bharatha Natyam*), the dance brings together all parts of my body – my arms, legs and eyes. As I keep dancing, the distinctions between myself and my dance dissolve; I become one with my dance; I become my dance. As the dancing intensifies and evolves, so does my sense of oneness with my dance. On the one hand, I merge with dance while concurrently creating my dance. If I were to slow down time within this process of co-creation and confluence, I step into a form that appears to be on the outside, until I become one with dance when its form is co-created by my dancing.

As dancer and dance come together and co-create each other, a third dynamic emerges: spiritual experience in dancing. I initially experience dancing as physical synchrony with music and my body; I then experience dancing as oneness within, and with another. I experience oneness with the emotions of dance, the form of dancing, and with the music and audience. I experience oneness as metaphysical awareness embodied in the form of dancer and dance.

When I (a dancer) enter an unrehearsed and partnered form (such as Contact Improvisation), I engage in an improvisational mode of enactment; a way of knowing myself and others through spontaneous movement exploration. I practice present moment awareness through self-attunement and by attuning myself to others. In this space of resonance, within and with my partner, I authentically express myself and practice how to be receptive. I provide and receive support to and from my dancer partner(s). Together we co-create momentum and movement paths.

Within this improvisational form, we do not seek to achieve a predetermined outcome. However, we do receive immediate feedback as to the quality of resonance that naturally unfolds 'inside' the dance. In this space, my own boundaries are at times exaggerated by touch, as contact reveals the differences between myself and others. Spontaneous exploration infuses a sense of radical acceptance for what arises at the ever-shifting point of contact. At other times, boundaries seem to dissipate. When my intention aligns with that of my partner, individuality leads to mutuality: an effortless co-creative emergence of movements inside a dialogical flow, and a sense of oneness in moving communion. The dance is dancing me/us, and I experience selflessness inside the emerging flow. Contact acts as a paradoxical portal that reveals individuality and/or helps dissolve it.

Moving out of the dance floor and looking at our dance, we sense that our dialogues illumine some common aspects of spirituality in dance, as well as some unique aspects relevant to the forms of dance and the dancer. The particular intentions that dancers bring to their own dancing will shape their spiritual experience. We recognize that openness to engage in and cultivate this dimension of reality have textured our experiences, as well as our familiarity with contemplative practices.

More needs to be said, for sure, and many questions arise that could be explored further. We became curious about how dance forms, besides co-creating a spiritual experience, also sustain the intensity of spiritual experience over a prolonged period of time. Are there specific aspects in each form that privilege or help disclose spiritual experience for the dancer? We also asked ourselves: what is the connection between spirituality and healing? And what happens when the dancing stops – i.e. what is a dancer's experience of disengagement from form and from spirituality?

As we briefly explored the historical and cultural context, our curiosity was aroused about the ethos of the dance forms and how each may shape particular embodiments of spirituality. How did each form arise, change and transform over time? And how did these changes reflect the changes in the dancers' community and the society at large? These questions still await further exploration.

Finally, we ask how this phenomenological exploration applies to other forms of dance. We hope this article models a useful form of exploration that can be applied to any forms of dance, each in its own terms. Our exploration and dialogue suggest that different forms of dance attune dancers differently to enter a culturally influenced space of spiritual resonance. Intention and willingness to surrender to the process, however, transcend form, and act as powerful catalysts for an emergent spirituality that enriches dancers, dance and onlookers.

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