

Mindfulness as a Pedagogical Tool: Kuchipudi Indian Classical Hindu Dance

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Contemplative pedagogy is necessary in the dance world because it can be a very dangerous place without it. Dance students who aim to sustain the so-called "right" body image too often develop a physical obsession that leads to dangers like bulimia and anorexia. Moreover, the stresses of performing on stage, combined with other pressures of daily life, may overwhelm dancers to the point where they might feel depressed or even suicidal. Thus, it is vital to develop a pedagogy that thinks about not only the physical but also the spiritual well-being of dancers. The application of mindfulness as a pedagogical tool that focuses on physical and spiritual wellness is ideal in this regard.

I originally developed this thesis for a presentation at The Center for Contemplative Mind in Higher Education, where I embodied key components of mindfulness. I engaged the audience in an aesthetic experience as I danced a Kuchipudi Indian classical Hindu dance.¹ I demonstrated mindfulness before, during, and after the dance. I wore a traditional Kuchipudi costume and adorned my body with the sacred ornaments of Kuchipudi dance. Throughout the time I dressed for the dance, I practiced mindfulness. Before I danced for those attending the conference, I described my spiritual transformation to the audience. Then, I continued to practice mindfulness as I engaged in a Kuchipudi Indian classical Hindu dance. The audience was instrumental in this aesthetic experience because they participated in my practice of mindfulness. After the dance, I described how I propose to practice mindfulness as a dancer.

The audience at the conference spoke about the way that I portrayed mindfulness as a self-pedagogical tool. Furthermore, we talked about how this applies across the disciplines of music and dance. After the conference experience, I realized that mindfulness practices are a vital part of my contemplative practices as a Kuchipudi Indian classical Hindu dancer. It is

important to mention that I engaged in a similar presentation when I was invited to present and dance for a religious studies undergraduate class at Fairfield University. I met a few students who entered into dialogue with me. The students conveyed to me that they plan to integrate mindfulness before, during, and after various activities in which they participate, such as when they partake in sports and gymnastics. Thus, although I shared my contemplative practice of mindfulness as a Kuchipudi Indian classical Hindu dancer, I recognize that those who encounter these ideas freely apply these practices as they develop their own individualized self-pedagogy. However, I urge readers to understand the sacredness of mindfulness practices to prevent the reduction of mindfulness to a therapeutic tool, and also to block the flourishing of "Orientalism," as articulated by Edward Said.²

The methodology of this paper involves overcoming the duality of mind and body through unity. To accomplish this, I analyze the venerable Thích Nhất Hạnh's definition of mindfulness.³ Then, I apply mindfulness to my contemplative practice as a Kuchipudi Indian classical Hindu dancer. I discuss mindfulness before the dance, during the dance, and after the dance. The method consists of an analysis and synthesis of the components of mindfulness, which include the concepts of no-self and interbeing.⁴ The findings are positive in the sense that they serve the intended purpose of mindfulness as described by Hạnh. The criteria for the positive findings are dependent on a pragmatic notion of mindfulness. If mindfulness does not allow the dance to function in a pragmatic manner, then mindfulness will hinder the dance. In other words, this application of mindfulness allows the dance to function as dance.

MINDFULNESS

The great Zen master, Thích Nhất Hạnh, discusses the art of mindful living in several of his publications.

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Here, Sabrina D. MisirHiralall, as the dancer, offers flowers to the Supreme Being.

"Mindfulness is the miracle by which we master and restore ourselves."⁵ For Hanh, when people embrace themselves through the practice of mindfulness, they learn to acknowledge their emotions peacefully. For example, a person may acknowledge anger in a non-violent manner by focussing on one's breathing. This will cause the individual to water a seed of peace as opposed to a seed of anger. Thus, mindfulness causes people to live peacefully in the present moment as they breathe and acknowledge their emotions.

Breathing, like meditation, is no less than an art. You have to be very artful handling your in-breath and out-breath, so that harmony can be reestablished in your body and your mind... Once your breathing has become calmer and deeper, you can continue breathing like this in order to embrace different parts of your body.⁶

People who practice mindfulness are aware of breathing in and out in a manner that allows each individual to embrace the human body with breaths. Hanh discusses belly breaths as breathing that is fully aware of the rise and fall of the abdomen.⁷ Breathing in and out helps to establish a harmonious relationship between the mind and the body when it is done mindfully. Because the mind uses mindfulness as a tool to control the breathing that is occurring, this harmonious relationship between the mind and the body helps individuals control their emotions through breathing.

In essence, people are continuously aware of their emotions when they are mindful.

Inside every one of us is a garden, and every practitioner has to go back to their garden and take care of it. Maybe in the past, you left it untended for a long time. You should know exactly what is going on in your own garden, and try to put everything else in order. Restore the beauty; restore the harmony in your garden. If it is well tended, many people will enjoy.⁸

Compare emotions to the seeds that are planted in a garden. If people water the seeds of anger, violence, and other negative energies, then they will have a garden filled with negative energy. However, if they use peace to water all of the seeds, including the seeds of anger and violence, then they will restore the

positive energy of the garden. As a result, the people around them may enjoy the mindfully reaped fruits of the garden.

MINDFULNESS BEFORE THE DANCE

According to Hanh, individuals practice mindfulness if they learn to see themselves as a part of the objects that they are in contact with. Hanh uses the term "inter-be" to describe an individual's awareness of a connection to material objects to which they are linked spiritually. For Hanh, to inter-be means to recognize the essence of materialistic objects by thinking beyond the materialistic elements of the objects. People learn to inter-be with materialistic objects by realizing that they co-exist with the elements of the earth.

Looking even more deeply, we can see we are in it too. This is not difficult to see, because when we look at a sheet of paper, the sheet of paper is part of our perception. Your mind is here and my mind is also. So we can say that everything is in here with this sheet of paper. You cannot point to one thing that is not here – time, space, the earth, the rain, the minerals in the soil, the sunshine, the cloud, the river, the heat. Everything co-exists with this sheet of paper... 'To be' is to inter-be. You cannot just be by yourself alone. You have to inter-be with every other thing. This sheet of paper is, because everything else is.⁹

The Kuchipudi Indian classical Hindu dancer should develop an awareness of a connection to the elements with which the dancer is adorned, including the dancer's makeup, jewelry, and costume. To look carefully at the material objects that the dancer wears means that the dancer sees that the dancer is part of the objects. This is because the makeup, jewelry, and costume of the dancer are part of the dancer's presence.

Moreover, the dancer should see that the human-made construction of the makeup, jewelry, and costume is only possible because of elements of the earth which become a part of their composition and to which the dancer is also intimately connected. Thus, to look carefully means that the dancer recognizes an interbeing with the makeup, jewelry, and costume by acknowledging the vital connection to these objects. The dancer dresses as a dancer because of the makeup,

costume, and jewelry that adorns the body. In essence, it is significant to the spiritual transformation of the Kuchipudi Indian classical Hindu dancer to become the dancer by putting on the dancer's attire. Bharatamuni thinks about this spiritual transformation that the dancer undergoes before the performance.

The painted body together with the change of the costume should be considered the result of Nityadharm (conventional practice) affecting the characters. A creature that enters and the body renounces its previous nature of the previous body and assumes another character [sic]. In the same way a person with different costume and colours adopts the behavior of the person concerned [sic].¹⁰

As the spiritual transformation begins, the Kuchipudi Indian classical Hindu dancer adorns the human body with jewelry as radiant as the sun's rays. Correspondingly, the costumes are a part of the theatrical language that represents the characters that the Hindu dancer becomes during dance. In this sense, the Hindu dancer is mindful of the beginning of a spiritual transformation that occurs when getting dressed. By the same token, the spiritual transformation continues to occur as the Kuchipudi Indian classical Hindu dancer brings a particular personality to the dance while also becoming the characters in the drama. In Kuchipudi dance, the dancer does not just tell the history of the characters, but seeks to become the characters through dance.

Once the dancer is adorned with makeup, jewelry, and costume, the dancer is ready to wear the sacred *Ghungaros*, bells worn on the dancer's ankles.¹¹ The *Ghungaros* are not worn for a decorative purpose. Rather, the *Ghungaros* are worn to portray the dancer's rhythmic beats to the audience. In addition, the *Ghungaros* are a form of music, which for many believers of Hinduism represents a symbol of the musical goddess, Sarasvati Mata. The Goddess of the fine arts is a manifestation of the One Supreme Being.¹² Some Hindu dancers acknowledge the *Ghungaros* as a symbol of Natraj, the manifestation of the One Supreme Being in the form of dance.¹³ In fact, many Hindu dancers recite the dance prayer from Nandikeswara's *Abhinaya Darpanam* as the *Ghungaros* are placed on the ankles.¹⁴

*Om Aangikam Bhucanam Yasya
Vaachikam Sarwa Vaanmayam
Aabaaryam Candra-Taaraadi
Tam Vandee Saarvikaam Sivam*

This *stoka* (prayer) describes Shri Natraj, the Cosmic Dancer who is also known as Shivaji. In the first line, the dancer acknowledges that the movement of the human body is used by Shivaji to represent the movement of the entire universe. The prayer continues by realizing that the speech of Shivaji is the language of the entire universe. In addition, the Cosmic Shivaji's hair is adorned with the moon and stars of the universe. The prayer ends by saying that Shivaji is the One whom we worship as the Cosmic Entity.¹⁵ The Hindu dancer should engage in mindfulness while reciting the *stoka* and while placing the *Ghungaros* on the ankles.

To illustrate how the music of *Ghungaros* prompts one to be mindful, Hanh describes the sound of bells at Buddhist retreats. This relates to the *Ghungaros* of Hindu dancers.

The sound of the bell reminds us to return to our breathing in the present moment. ... Listening to the bell, our mind becomes one with the sound as it vibrates along, settles down, and fades away. With the help of the bell, our mind is collected and brought back to the present moment.¹⁶

Hanh believes the bell reminds people to be mindful of the present moment by interbeing with the bell as the sound vibrates and fades. Similarly, the sound of the bell that Hanh thinks about is analogous to the sound of the dancer's *Ghungaros*. This is because the tone of the *Ghungaros* serves as a symbol that reminds the dancer to practice mindfulness. When the dancer's body moves, the music of the *Ghungaros* reminds the dancer to be mindful of one's interbeing with the sound by uniting with the tone. The sound of the *Ghungaros* helps the mind live in the present moment through the creation of the sound.

After the Kuchipudi Indian classical Hindu dancer is dressed, the dancer continues to prepare for the performance traditionally by conducting the ritual of *puja*. The purpose of the *puja* is to acknowledge the Supreme Being who is requested to protect the dancer.

This adoration of the deities of the stage is on par with a *Yajna* (holy sacrifice). No one shall produce a play without the worship of the stage. These deities worship others when they themselves are worshipped. When they are honored, they bestow honor to others. Hence one shall assiduously perform the rite of the adoration of the [deities of the] stage.¹⁷

Bharatamuni views the ritual of *puja* as a necessary part of the Hindu dancer's preparation for the dance. Even though Bharatamuni states that the dancer should worship the stage, the stage is a metaphor for the worship of the Supreme Being who is essentially the stage. Nevertheless, each dancer worships the deities through different approaches based on circumstances. In some cases, the dancer may request a *pandit* to conduct rituals on stage before the curtains open.¹⁸ However, the dancer may also pray backstage before the performance due to circumstances. Sometimes, there is no backstage, which means the dancers might pray from a seat where they are waiting to perform. Regardless of the circumstances and the methods used, the Kuchipudi Indian classical Hindu dancer prepares to perform classical dances by seeking the blessings and protection of the Supreme Being of the world.

MINDFULNESS DURING THE DANCE

Kuchipudi Indian classical Hindu dancers perform Namaskaram before a formal dance begins. Here, the dancer uses the body to praise the Supreme Being, the teachers of the world, the audience, and Mother Earth, who is known in Hinduism as Dharati Maa. The dancer humbly touches Mother Earth by touching the stage floor. As the dancer touches Mother Earth, the dancer asks Mother Earth to forgive any harsh movements that the dancer may make when dancing. The dancer does not wish to bring pain to Mother Earth, but rather desires to bring the sensation of joy to Mother Earth and the audience through the medium of dance.¹⁹

During the performance of Namaskaram, it is vital that the dancer is mindful because the dancer hopes to purify the human body by touching Mother Earth and seeking blessings, which enables the dancer to communicate through dance to the audience. Hanh particularly discusses touching the earth as he writes,

Touching the earth helps us to purify our bodies and our minds. It helps us to maintain the awakened understanding of impermanence, interconnectedness. . . . We see all suffering beings in us and we see ourselves in them. As we keep the prostrate position, the boundary between self and other is removed. Then, we know what we should and should not do in our daily lives. Because of this insight, we can do many things of great benefit.²⁰

Touching the earth has the ability to help to purify bodies and minds. When the Kuchipudi Indian classical Hindu dancer touches the earth during Namaskaram, the dancer unites the body and mind. The dancer practices interbeing by realizing that there is an interconnection between the dancer and the world. If the Hindu dancer views Namaskaram as a way of interbeing with the world by offering salutations to the Supreme Being, the teachers of the world, the audience, and Mother Earth, then the dancer will overcome the boundary that lies between the dancer and the world. In other words, the Hindu dancer realizes that there is a connection between the Cosmic Force, the teachers of the world, the audience, and Mother Earth as opposed to a disconnection and separation. This connection allows the dancer to connect to a Supreme Being, the teachers of the world, the audience, and Mother Earth through the medium of the drama.

Throughout the Kuchipudi dance drama, the dancer becomes the danced characters. In a sense, Kuchipudi dance is presented in the form of acting.²¹ The Kuchipudi Indian classical Hindu dancer uses feelings and emotions to portray the characters within the drama. This drama is known as the *Natya* of the dance. Because the Kuchipudi Indian classical Hindu dancer undergoes a spiritual transformation to become a character for the audience, it is vital to concentrate on thoughts and actions during the dance. In addition, the dancer needs to focus on any dialogues that may occur within the dance. Hanh discusses the importance of attentiveness, which is beneficial for Kuchipudi Indian classical Hindu dancers.

The more we are mindful of our thoughts, speech, and actions, the more concentration we develop. With concentration, insight into the nature of our own suffering and the suffering of others arises. We then know what to do and what not to

do in order to live joyfully and in peace with our surroundings. Two important practices that help us cultivate the energy of mindfulness are mindful breathing and mindful walking. Our breath and our steps are always with us and we can use these simple everyday acts to calm our emotions and nourish our joy.²²

If the Kuchipudi Indian classical Hindu dancer learns to be mindful of thoughts and actions, then it is feasible to concentrate on the drama. Once the dancer is able to contemplate, the dancer can think about endured suffering. The acknowledgment of suffering helps the dancer and the audience ponder in a way that brings peace. In essence, the dancer should develop the energy of mindfulness by breathing mindfully on stage during the dance.

Aside from portraying characters on stage, the Kuchipudi Indian classical Hindu dancer also dances to melodies that do not relate the history of Hinduism. Instead, the Kuchipudi Indian classical Hindu dancer dances to the rhythmic beats of the dance while simply being the dancer and not "playing" the characters as "roles." This type of dance is referred to as a pure dance. According to Hanh,

It may be stated that a combination of *Nritya*, the pure dance based on the rhythmic movement of the limbs and the four-fold abhinaya or histrionic expression which is the life force of *Natya*, evolved itself as a special form of art known as *Nritya Kala* and this has been patronized by the kings.²³

The Kuchipudi Indian classical Hindu dancer's pure dance involves detailed sculpted poses that symbolize different forms of dance. Moreover, the dancer's bodily movements flow to the rhythmic beat of the music. While the dancer embodies this pure dance, the dancer uses facial expressions (*abhinaya*) to create a sensation of joy within the dancer, both for the dancer and for the audience. In many cases, the dancer's bodily movement and facial expression during *Nritya* decorates the stage with beauty.

Hanh's concept of no-self applies to the Kuchipudi Indian classical Hindu dancer who dances *Nritya*.

When we realize the true nature of no-self, we can let go of all of the grounds of view. We no

longer need to cling to or identify ourselves with anything, and we will no longer fall into states of confusion, anxiety, or sorrow. To receive the teachings of no-self requires us to use our full intelligence and skillfulness.²⁴

The concept of no-self involves letting go of all perspectives. This means that there is no need to be a part of any particular ideology. In fact, this causes individuals to be free of particular emotions that cause suffering. However, to engage in the concept of no-self requires the usage of intelligence to overcome suffering.

MINDFULNESS AFTER THE DANCE

Vatsyayan compares Indian classical Hindu dance to *puja*, a ritual performed to honor the One Supreme Being who has many different manifestations in Hinduism.

The dramatic spectacle, like the *yajna*, has a moral and ethical purpose. It will conduce moral duty (*dharma*), wealth economic well-being (*artha*), refine sensibilities (*kama*) and lead to liberation (*moksha*). The arts are thus an alternate, if not a parallel, path for the avowed goals of a culture which move concurrently on the three levels of the *adibhauitika* (material), *adhyatmika* (individual soul and self) and *adhidaitvika* (metaphysical divine).²⁵

Through the performance, the Hindu dancer paves the path of destiny towards *moksha* (liberation). When *moksha* is attained, the cycle of birth and death through reincarnation ends. The soul of the human being who attains *moksha* is returned to the Supreme Being free of bondage to the earthly world.²⁶ In the meantime, the Kuchipudi Indian classical Hindu dancer should remain mindful of the material garments that clothed the body during the performance, the connection between the dancer's being and the Supreme Being, and the metaphysical aspect of the performance. Throughout daily activities, the Kuchipudi Indian classical Hindu dancer should still remain mindful.

By following your breath and combining conscious breathing with your daily activities, you can cut across a stream of disturbing thoughts

and light the lamp of awakening. Full awareness of an out-breath and an in-breath is something wonderful that anyone can practice. . . . Combining full awareness of breathing with full awareness of the body during daily activities—walking, standing, lying, sitting, working—is a basic practice to cultivate concentration and to live in an awakened state.²⁷

When the Kuchipudi Indian classical Hindu dancer mindfully breathes while pursuing daily routines, the dancer becomes an awakened being as Hanh describes. Thus, the dancer is able to concentrate on cultivating positive energy as opposed to energy that disturbs a state of equanimity.

MOKSHA

Hanh provides tools for dance teachers to use as dancers themselves and also for their dance students. Without the application of these Hanhian tools, dancers run the risk of dealing poorly with the various strains of the dance world. Specifically, Hanh brings crucial components to dance pedagogy that helps dancers be successful despite the multiple pressures of the dance world. For example, dancers should not worry about maintaining the so-called “perfect” body image or “perfecting” the so-called dance routine, but rather should focus on dancing as a dancer engaged in the dance. Mindfulness helps dancers overcome cultural stereotypes about body image, which causes the dancers to lose focus on the dance. I am not saying that mindfulness is merely a therapeutic tool to deal with stress. What I am pointing to is the capacity of mindfulness to guide dancers to develop a sacred relation with the world.

Once Kuchipudi Indian classical Hindu dance teachers learn the art of mindfulness as described by Hanh, they may then teach the art of mindfulness to their students. Mindfulness helps the Kuchipudi Indian classical Hindu dancer to become a dancer who achieves the goals of Kuchipudi dance. In turn, this

allows dancers to become dance teachers who help dance students develop their own self-pedagogy. As a result, it is my hope that this contemplative pedagogy leads dance teachers and dance students to *moksha* (liberation). Hanh thinks about noble teachers who pave their destiny towards *moksha*.

Noble teachers can be distinguished from others...they transcend all concepts. The noble teachers are liberated. They are distinguished from others because they are in touch with and realize the unconditioned dharmas. They are no longer imprisoned by forms and concepts...In daily life we usually use our conceptual knowledge to grasp reality. But this is impossible. Meditation aims at breaking through all conceptual limitations and barriers so that we can move freely in the boundless ocean of reality.²⁸

If Kuchipudi Indian classical Hindu dance teachers are noble teachers, as defined by Hanh, then these teachers will help students use their free will to pave their way towards attaining *moksha*, which is the ultimate goal in Hinduism. In order to be a noble teacher or noble student, according to Hanh, teachers and students need to learn to grasp reality by trying to transcend concepts. In other words, one perspective of reality involves the creation of reality through the world constructed by the beings within the world. However, unity with a Supreme Being through *moksha* transcends these concepts in the sense that the created reality does not exist anymore since the individual is now a part of a Supreme Being. Kuchipudi Indian classical Hindu dance teachers and students who are on the path of *moksha* have limitless possibilities as dancers who realize that they are connected to a Cosmic Force and the people of the world even though there are separations that particularize each individual. Thus, the dancers are in an ocean of reality as described by Hanh. In this ocean, Kuchipudi Indian classical Hindu dancers aesthetically enjoy the sensation of dance that leads to unity with a Supreme Being.

NOTES

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15. Ibid., 1-2.
16. Thich Nhất Hạnh, *Breathe! You are Alive: Sutra on the Full Assurance of Breathing* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1990), 19-20.
17. Bharatamuni, 30.
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24. Thich Nhất Hạnh and Annabel Laitry, *Thundering Silence: Sutra on Knowing the Better Way to Catch a Snake* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1993), 45.
25. Vatsyayan, 39.
26. Ibid., 106.
27. Thich Nhất Hạnh, *Breathe!*, 45.
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