

Dance and Civilization (English version)

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To dance is above all to communicate, to unite, to join together, and to touch others on a fundamental level of existence. Dance is union; union of one human being with another, one person with the cosmos, one human being with God. The spoken language remains within the dominance of a delusion. Words, although seemingly easy to comprehend, can hide images that deceive and lead us into a never-ending labyrinth of Babel-like semantics. Extended conversation more often leads to argument than to concord among people.

To dance is also to speak the language of animals, to communicate with stones, to understand the song of the sea and the message in the wind, to discover with the stars, to approach the heights of existence itself. To dance is to transcend our poor human condition and to join fully in the profound life of the cosmos.

Man, at the dawn of any civilization, furiously beat the ground with his bare feet. Rhythm came to life, then sound and space, and trance. In the union with invisible forces, the Dance is born.

If we look carefully at the origins of all cultures, we always discover dance, characterized by the following separate but complementary manifestations.

- 1) The solitary dancer: the priest, the shaman, the one initiated into secret communal traditions embodies all the primary forces of their ethnic group, their tribe, and their village. By means of their dance, they enter into communication with the Divine, with the essence and Being. They are the intermediaries between God and human beings. The sacred dancer is solitary, but in their role as priest or priestess, they represent the humanity to which they belong, and carry out rituals with whole energy of the group, the city and the empire.
- 2) The dancer in a group: the deep feeling of belonging to a common ethnic, economic and cultural group gives rise to a dance in which individuals express their appreciation of the fact that they are members of a community united by the same traditions.

These manifestations lead us to discover two aspects of dance present in its original form.

Sacred dance: a human being, alone in communication with the Divine, with the forces of the Invisible.

Social dance: the human group, united by shared geographical and cultural bonds, asserting its identity.

In dance, the foot provides the driving energy; rhythm emerges before or together with music. (This, in fact, is the fulfillment of dance.)

The hand executes its own melody: flower, butterfly, flame...and in the case of social dance, one hand grasps another, and the group exists. Thus is born union, ronde, farandole, quadrille, and square dance.

In the mid-Sixties, I traveled to India. From my very earliest years, that country, thanks to my father, was as familiar to me as any city in France. Yet, because of the Second World War and German occupation, and our poverty, some of French cities seemed out of reach, and even mystical. The Bhagavad Gîta was one of my favorite books, along with Molière, Nietzsche and Baudelaire. Things have not changed since that time.

India is in fact a sub-continent in which all climates, all races, all religions, all cultures, indigenous and foreign, meet. To go from Kerala to the Himalayas through Rajasthan is like traveling from the south of Morocco to Mont Blanc, with a call at magical tropical islands where water and verdure maintain the mugginess of tropical flowers and fruits which seafarers dream about. And so I set out for India, seeking...What I truly hoped was to meet a genuine yoga master (such are generally rare and hidden), who could guide me through this mundane, unknown path.

Thanks to Indian friends living in Europe, I had a letter of introduction to one of these invisible men. They are invisible not because of magic, but because, unlike Europeanized or Americanized “gurus,” they are seemingly ordinary persons with nothing but their glance to differentiate them from daily passersby.

I meet the Master:

“Why do you wish to do yoga?”

“I think this can help me to strengthen my own life and to advance in my work.”

(Needless to say, this conversation took place with help of a young student

interpreter.)

“What is your job?”

“I am a dancer.”

“Dance is a gift of the gods—Shiva-Naharaja is the lord of dance. It is a difficult art. What is your dance?”

I felt embarrassed to explain. In fact, I did not know what my dance was!

“I guess that you do daily training, exercises?”

“Yes, of course!”

I did not know how to explain to him. And he said:

“Show me!”

I noticed a wooden balcony surrounding the terrace where we were seated on the floor.

“Like that, we do exercises at the bar.”

“Go ahead.”

I breathed deeply, even more anxious in front of him than on opening night. The floor was polished natural wood, but not slippery, which allowed me to do careful and simple work. After forty minutes, neither his body nor his gaze had shifted. Sweating, I said to him:

“It is what we do every morning. The bar.”

A long silence.

Then:

“Why do you want to do yoga? If your mental work is free and your body straight and without tension, if you let the exercise conduct you and not the contrary, if you desire nothing but the exercise for its beauty and truth, you have your yoga. Don't look elsewhere. Do what you call “the bar” for its beauty, without thinking of progress, because we only progress by giving up the idea of progress.”

Since that day, to me, the bar is not linked to a technique, a style, a certain form of dance. It is a form of yoga which strengthens my body and my mind and offers me a chance to understand any form of dance, because all dance partakes of the same essence. The problem is always to pass from the traditional art to the so-called artist's world.

Who built the temples in Egypt, in Europe, in Asia?

Which artist signed the dances in India, in Africa or in Bali? Is the signature,

even of those counted among the greatest, truly “progress”?

Traditional art will always remain as the source of inspiration, and aspiring artists (among whom I must count myself) will always need to resort to the fundamental traditions and source of being. Without the deep meaning of the sacred, without the communal contribution of dance in its social aspect, my art means nothing. I am just one link in the chain of civilization which is at times ascending, but more often only gives the appearance of progress.

During my years of searching, my discovery of Japan in the sixties was like a flash of inspiration. Since my childhood, the country of the rising sun had been fascinating to me. I had read Sei Shonagon, explored the sculpture and temples of Kyoto and Nara, seen the movies of Mizoguchi and Kurosawa, and been touched by such examples of great beauty and intelligence. I knew of the rapid rise to modernity undergone by Japan, and the Japanese successes in the technological field, all different but always bold and in the forefront of the present-day world. I first discovered Japanese theatre, Noh, Kabuki, Bunraku—forms of art in which words, dance, music and the sense of space form a whole. I was transported with admiration when I encountered in these manifestations of the past their complementary modernity, and when I realized to what extent this theatre, this dance, were what myself and others of the European theatre were so eagerly searching for. After a day spent experiencing Noh, soaked in the modernity, abstract and lyrical, of this dance of ages past, and above all impressed by its timelessness, I emerged to see skyscrapers, electronic goods, the Shinkansen, advertisements, shops filled with useless goods—all of which seemed to me to come from another age. By contrast, the traditional Japanese arts appeared to me to embody the essence of the civilization of the future.

Material progress is often all but delusion, and real modernity is discovered in ages other than our own, in which the word “modern” is so often used! The Pantheon is modern, Shakespeare is modern, Jean-Sebastian Bach is modern, the Ise-jingu Shrine is modern.

But does not the essence of Dance lie in its ability to transcend time and, with rhythm, the pulse of our heart, to find again eternity in the human?