

Group Dance as Transformational Movement

(This article was first published in April 1984 in The Sound newsletter, Marin County, California, USA)

Nothing in life is either as simple or as complex as we would like to put into words. So it is with dance and movement as spiritual practice: any discussion is open-ended, and Allah holds the trump card. Many kinds of dance may be spiritual; this discussion is limited to certain group practices in Sufism.

If we would always listen to the heart's desire, we would always move with grace and ease, no restriction or contraction anywhere. This is not the physical heart, but the one that Qur'an posits as the globe over the Divine Light. But we do not always move from that never-changing, ever-changing center; it is not foremost in our consciousness until awareness comes to every cell.

For this reason, all the scriptures posit three bodies, and all religionists reject them. In the Sufi tradition, this model may be found in the writings of Pir-O-Murshid Hazrat Inayat Khan (*Sufi Message Vol. 5, Metaphysics; Vol. 1, Soul Whence and Whither*). It is to lead us back to our long-lost heritage that consideration of body, mind, and soul (or basic, conscious, and high selves) is undertaken. When body, mind, and soul agree on a course of action, there is no separation. There is only a feeling of "whole-heartedness." This is a deeper agreement than simply doing what "feels right" at the moment (which may be based on habit or unconscious impression).

Bringing both guidance and physical needs/desires together at a moment of time is not a simple task for anyone who has experienced the conflicts of life. It may happen in a moment of grace; it may be the result of difficult work within oneself (see "Inner Life," *Message Vol. 1*). When speaking of body, mind, and soul, one does not violate the principle of unity: there are only relative selves—or at least that's what we say in zikr. To act that way may take the recognition of differences, of parts, of conflicts within and then integration of them by allowing the light of God through the soul to illuminate them. Some people talk about putting the high self in touch with the basic selves. It is no different from Hazrat Inayat Khan's "Unity, not Uniformity." Uniformity ignores the existence of individual parts (selves, conflicts, muscle spasms); unity recognizes and integrates them.

What does this have to do with movement and dance? In our society, most people experience the physical body as an inarticulate lump of self which is pushed to and from places and identified with "I." Or the body may be very articulate (in accordance with modern aerobic-consciousness) but still locked into "I." The initial experience of a practice like the Dances of Universal Peace is to feel the body in movement, first while being connected to a group and, second, while being connected to the high self through the sacred phrased and devotion of the group. Naturally, this is not everyone's experience ("ripeness is all," says Shakespeare), but those who do have an initial experience come to the shocking realization that they are not limited to their bodies or minds. This is a form of ecstasy; the degree depends on the readiness.

When it happens, the condition of "getting high" usually continues for a while—body and soul unite in the heart. At some point, though, the body (or as seen through Soulwork language, the "basic selves" or *nafs* in Sufi terms) must be articulated: flexibility must be developed. Psychologically, one might say that "needs" must be recognized (though not pandered to). In classical Sufism, this is called the training of the ego (*nafs*). The body (basic selves) must cease to be an undifferentiated lump; physically, "unity not uniformity" must be realized. Otherwise, the increasing magnetism developed through spiritual practice has nowhere to go, the body (basic self) isn't ready for it. Much could be said here, but compare, for instance, the teaching of Al-Ghazzali on the inner way of doing Nimaz (prayer with movement) with modern essays on Sensory Awareness by Charlotte Selver and Charles Brooks.

The Sufic approach is generally dependent on a divine "trickle down" effect. If one stays with the

practices and utilizes the teacher-disciple relationship (see the papers on “Path of Initiation” and “Fana-fi-Sheikh”), the connection established with the soul will sooner or later force a change in ways of thinking, acting, and being in the body. More than one person has experienced the feeling of being “unable to go back” after setting out on the path. What often happens after an initial experience of ecstasy with the Dances is that one falls into a rut. There is too much magnetism coming through the Dance for one to integrate. With no further work on the body (or basic self), it is just like piling more and more water behind a dam. At some point, the channel will open, but not always in a very comfortable way.

There is a way of pain and a way of love. Many people talk about love. The real way of love involves recognizing and becoming aware of those parts of ourselves, body and mind, that are stuck and refusing to be flexible to the Divine will. This is often played out in our relationships with the “others” we see (hence the development of various forms of somatic and transpersonal counseling). When the light of the soul is allowed to shine on those parts, they are then endowed with heart themselves. (The story of the fairy and the dollhouse in the last chapter of “The Purpose of Life” (*Sufi Message Vol. 1*) is worth referring to here.)

Often, before one reaches total awareness of a practice like the Dances in all parts of the body, one stops dancing because one is “not getting high anymore.” Or, one hears the statement that the Dances are an introductory practice. They are certainly that, based on the foregoing (and also the fact that they may be used outside of a Sufi initiatic context as part of the Brotherhood work). But there is a continued deep course of development that necessitates work outside of the ritual Dance, on the body and on the aspects of self that are delaying finding their place in the circle of unity. This work may occur in many ways; all involve some sort of willing surrender by the basic self to a process of unfoldment (with a teacher or not). To stay with the Dances of Universal Peace and follow this course past the introductory “getting high” has not been the path of many. One may go from the Dances to moving group zikr: to “get high” again simply by prolonging the practice. By rehitching one’s wagon to a star, so to speak, the process of integration may indeed be “kick-started.” Or one may simply stop doing group zikr because one is no longer getting high.

In one sense, it doesn’t matter and nothing is lost. Once one starts the process of unfoldment, there is no stopping it, and sooner or later the full realization must come. This is a project of a lifetime(s), and as the Buddha said, there are many dharmic paths. Whether one is visibly doing a “spiritual practice” or not, there is always the “greater jihad” within oneself (remember, however, that Mohammed made friends of most of his enemies).

Deeper levels of the Dances and moving zikr include feeling union with another person. In greeting dances, one is encouraged to unite in the sacred phrase with a partner and, gradually or suddenly, may actually feel at one. Or in certain zikrs, when the conductor (or his representative) brings another zakir into the center to dance, the positive and negative pole together may form the battery called “the teachers.” (See “Path of Initiation & Discipleship” commentary.)

Presentation to the conscious mind of the other as self (or the self as other) encourages recognition of those parts of oneself still unconscious or unintegrated. It is a sort of affirmation in physical form. In the Dances and some moving zikr, there is also encouragement of some expression of individuality (through various wazifas or free spins) within the field of the divine dynamo set up. This also encourages feeling the body (basic selves) in a way that is not alienated from the high self or from each other. One might also consider male /female partner dances in this light.

These are deep waters, and there may be no value in considering concepts before life presents the issue to be faced. In Sufism, there is a constant process of feeling unity and recognizing individuality in order to bring a new synthesis (see Psychology,” Chapter 1, *Vol. 11*). In a practical, physical sense, this means bringing the divine awareness through sound and movement into each part and then reaching an ever fuller agreement among the three bodies. It’s like collective bargaining in a way—you always have to come up with a new contract, until everyone trusts each other so much that they respond as one. Guidance

changes, so do mind and body. Prophet Mohammed (through whom be Peace) said, “Allah, we have not known you as you really are.” So there’s work to be done. When one can live in the Presence (Akhlak Allah) more and more of the time, the recognition of unity and diversity as not different becomes a reality, not a concept.

This is really the middle of a conversation, beginning with Pir-O-Murshid Samuel Lewis’s “Spiritual Dancing” and related writings by Pir-O-Murshid Hazrat Inayat Khan. More words will not necessarily further having the experience, but it may well help explain what has already happened to one, so one need not repeat patterns. Bismillah!

--Saadi Neil Douglas-Klotz