

The Dances and Sacred Transmission: Nurturing Growth for the Coming Generations

Looking at the earth's history of sacred traditions, a lineage holder (by whatever name--whether shaman or zen master) is responsible for "passing the torch" to at least one other person, often several. Sometimes a person's responsibility is clearly set at birth (as is the case with the Dalai Lama). In other cases, a person's responsibility and accountability increases with involvement and commitment until the "novice shaman" discovers that behind the master's mask is her own face. In the religion of Old Europe, the Green Man withers and dies in the fall/winter only to be reborn as the light waxes again. But the Goddess--the underlying reality--persists through all faces. In the same way, the "transmission" of a genuine spiritual practice persists beyond those through whom the transmission passes.

We say that our work with the Dances is more than a pastiche of folk movements and chants from around the world. We strive to avoid the "sacred/cultural strip-mining" indicative of much of the recent "New Age" movement which is the psychic counterpart to what Western society has done to the resources of native peoples and the earth. As such, it is important to tell the story of our own lineage, to uphold the value of sacred transmission and make common cause with other inheritors of native wisdom.

That our own transmission is rooted in Native Middle Eastern mysticism through the form called Sufism goes without saying. Yet Murshid Samuel Lewis also participated in a genuine, long-term spiritual apprenticeship (student-teacher relationship) in Kabbalah, Buddhism and Hinduism. From this experience of traveling more than one path, as well as from his apprenticeship with sacred dance mentor Ruth St. Denis, he began the Dances and Walks.

The sacred human relationship--whether called apprenticeship, mentoring or the initiatic relationship--is essential to the genuine transmission of the sacred and has always been so. The stories, chants, practices, feeling, breath, and touch of the earth's traditions have always been conveyed person-to-person, because they were first conveyed from a human being's intimate touch with the cosmos. It was only when Western culture "ascended" into the cognitive mind that it began to operate under the delusion that wisdom could be conveyed by a book or even a seminar without an ongoing, intimate relationship and commitment through the embodied conveyor of that wisdom to the Source.

This is not to say that each person is not capable of receiving wisdom from the cosmos, God, or Nature as our ancestors did. But if one wishes to learn the feeling and touch of a specific practice or native tradition (including the Dances) one must be around that feeling and touch long enough to re-member and embody it. For learning to Dance (in the way that Murshid Wali Ali mentions in *Spiritual Dance and Walk*), the feel and touch of the circle for a certain period is sufficient and powerful. For leading the Dances and Walks, the feeling and touch of another leader for a certain period is necessary and effective.

This model takes its image from the earth, not the sky: "I am the vine and you are the branches of it." It is not pyramidal or patriarchal but deeply rooted in the story of its own tradition. We value this grounding in native traditions, why not our own Dance tradition? Those who wish to glean from sacred traditions while making a commitment to none, those who wish to harvest where they do not sow, find nowhere to stand on the earth. They are like the patriarchal marauders of the ancient world or the rain forest clear-cutters of the modern one.

In a sacred apprenticeship relationship, self-discipline, consistency, willing surrender and service are the key themes and prove the existence of genuine growth, attainment and ultimately the ability to carry the magnetic-love current called *transmission* or *lineage* in various traditions. Here the words of Jesus are again to the point: "By their fruits you shall know them--either connected to the Source and ripe, or disconnected, out of rhythm with the Source and unripe

The "source," in the area of the Dances and Walks, is the ultimately the heart of God. The essential nexus or connection to it is the being of Murshid Samuel L. Lewis and his successors in this line. There is no transmission in this area without a genuine connection to this being, albeit his personality--or how he embodied on earth--is only a doorway to an attunement with his ongoing, living presence, as well as that of his own teachers.

A person may be an inspired or inspiring Dance teacher without a connection to Murshid Samuel L. Lewis, even a wonderful conveyor of Dance "technique." Yet such a person cannot be said to channel the blessing-magnetism Murshid demonstrated or hold part of the transmission of this work without a clear relationship through apprenticeship to the source. Just as Vipassana, as it has been extracted from historical Buddhism, is (or should be) more than just the calm exchange of air in the lungs; as Yoga is more than simply the assumption of certain postures, so the Dances of Universal Peace are more than learning the words, melody and movements. The Walks are more than knowing the breathing pattern and some stereotypical movements.

Ultimately, those closest to the source of transmission and who bear responsibility for it initially feel that it is their teacher/mentor who works through them and that they were chosen contrary to, or at least without the awareness of, their conscious will. At some point there may even be resentment at having been "stuck with the job." Yet through the personal unfoldment that sacred apprenticeship involves, one comes to know the depths of one's psyche, both the integrated and unintegrated reaches, the light and shadow. Then one realizes that one did choose at a very deep level--and can only decide whether or not to keep choosing. Historically, to be most efficient, the lineage holder may decide to concentrate on transmitting to one person intensively or to several; that is, to run as many connections as possible to the source in the hope that some will "take."

Ultimately, organizations do not and cannot hold spiritual authority for a transmission; only human beings can and do. This is a consistent theme of Murshid Samuel Lewis's writings and life.

In order to be responsible for keeping the Dances alive for the coming generations, we must ask ourselves whether we are willing to take up the larger, intensive work of the Dances of Universal Peace: not just the latest Dance with which to enliven a workshop, but the work of the Dances themselves as a path and a gift for all humans of all cultures.

Within the context of the history of the Ruhaniat and Dance organizations, we have struggled with the issues of respect for transmission and lineage bearing. Sometimes these issues have seemed almost in opposition to the freely-given extensive mission of the Dances. These issues have also become entwined with certification, expectations of certified teachers, and financial relationships of teachers to various organizations. This has caused all of us to look at our own issues around self-worth, gratitude, need for recognition, support, friendship and ultimately, choice. Initiation, in its broad sense, means choosing to take a step in an unknown direction (according to Hazrat Inayat Khan). At the same time, Hazrat Inayat Khan also said that the only value in surrender and service lies in its willingness.

Ultimate responsibility for the Dances and their continuance lies with human beings. The Dances are a gift for our remembrance of cosmic unity and diversity as well as the preciousness of all life. Should an organizational apparatus fail or need to be traded in for a new vehicle, the Dances will continue through the dedication of individuals who step forward to say "I can!" and who remain companions to each other on the way.

Toward this vision, we may acknowledge that organizations lend themselves to the type of dysfunctional behaviour many of us experienced in our families. We may vow to stay clear with each other, recognizing the veils that lead us to project our un-grownup expectations and judgments onto each other. We may vow to step forward joyfully, gratefully and without expectation that any organization will feed, support or empower us.

Ultimately this nurturance, support and power comes progressively from ourselves, each other, our teachers and the Only Being.

--Saadi Shakur Chishti June 2009