

Elements of Mastery:

## **A Beginner's Guide – Some Notes for Leading the Dances**

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These notes were initially written to help people on a dance leadership training course to lead their first dance though they would hopefully be of relevance to all dance leaders interested in how I personally go about leading the dances.

Always bear in mind that the Sacred Phrase is the most important component of any dance. Really getting to know the sacred phrases on a deep inner level is the primary foundation for any dance you will ever lead and any dance you will ever experience.

By getting to know a sacred phrase one means actively working with the phrase so that it becomes literally and metaphorically imprinted upon one's cells. It becomes an inner friend. Do this at different times and often; by singing, chanting, whispering, breathing, thinking, sitting and walking with the phrase. Get to know each syllable of the phrase. Get to know the rhythm of the phrase and feel how it flows with the rhythm of the breath. Explore how these rhythms can be different and different times and with different concentrations. Feel the phrase's vibrations in the heart but also notice where else it resonates. Ultimately feel it resonate in the whole being.

For your first dance to lead choose a sacred phrase that you perhaps already feel a connection to. I would strongly recommend that you do not choose a dance in the English language at this stage. Choose a dance that you feel an affinity to already. It could be a non-partner dance or even a partner dance if it is a relatively simple partner progression.

Spend time dancing the steps. Make sure the feet have it precisely and that you have strong ground beneath you. Check that you have the steps and movements correctly in mind.

Feel all the subtleties of movement in the heart connected to your particular dance. Allow the movements to radiate from the heart. Over and over again dance the dance, singing the mantra as you do so on your own. Incorporate this into your own daily spiritual practice at least for a time. The dance therefore becomes an integral part of your inner knowing. You embody the dance, you radiate the vibration of the sacred phrase.

In one's inner eye visualize the movements and the flow of the dance. Feel the flow. In this space fill any places where there may be gaps or leaks in the energetic flow.

Over time the more you can explore your particular sacred phrase and dance the more deeply it will impress itself into your being. So that ultimately you are the dance, you are the sacred phrase.

Try to avoid putting yourself into the position where you leave things to the last minute, or even with only week or less to go before a dance session. Then there will likely be tension in you and in the process.

With each dance one wants to master go through a similar inner and outer process. As one becomes more skilled in these practices one gradually needs less time to fully embody a dance. But do not try to learn too many dances too quickly. If one expands one's repertoire prematurely then the dances are less likely

to be fully assimilated in one's being. You probably won't re-member them. One will at best have only a superficial knowledge of dances learned too quickly and this will be clear to all who experience your dance leading.

Make it all an easy enjoyable learning experience. There is no trying or forcing, simply exploring the whole process and its effects within you and around you.

For the purposes of introducing a dance to a circle of dancers one also ideally needs to have some sense of the literal meaning of the sacred phrase. There is no need for a lot of words. While one may have a depth of knowledge and experience within oneself regarding a particular tradition or a sacred phrase one doesn't need to communicate this in words to people; one communicates it with one's being and one's resonant frequency.

Generally I begin by teaching people the words, in short parts if it is a long phrase. Say the phrase have people repeat it, at least a few times and more if you feel some of the dancers are still not getting it. No need to overdo this first stage as generally when one introduces the melody this helps with the assimilation of the words.

Sing a short phrase of the melody. Have people sing it back to you. Then sing the next phase and have people sing it back. And so on until the whole melody is covered. At this stage one is listening to how people may or may not be getting the melody.

It is worth pointing out here that any place where we as the leader may waver or be unclear with the melody this will be reflected back to us usually in an amplified form. Make sure you have the melody of a particular dance clear within you.

Sing the whole melody through with the dancers a few times. This is a learning process for the dancers but it also begins to create the atmosphere of the particular dance. Let the singing of the mantra build the atmosphere rather than having to use one's own energy to do so. If one moves through this phase too quickly people will feel less than comfortable especially if they do not feel some confidence with the words or the melody. You are losing them so to speak even at the start.

Anyone who dances with me would notice that I almost always begin a dance in this way even if I know that the majority of people or even all of the people know the words, the melody and the dance. For me this is the important first stage of building a strong energetic container for the experience of each particular dance.

Then go on to the movements and how they blend with the melody. Demonstrate the movements as clearly as possible with whatever verbal description that seems appropriate. But don't only describe the movements. Words can confuse just as much as they can elaborate. As one works more with the dances one will learn what to say and often more importantly, what not to say, which is of most help. But the bottom line is always watch me and the way I do it.

When people are practicing the movements then also have people sing as this helps them assimilate. If there is a partner progression then clearly demonstrate this with another dancer or dancers. Make sure people watch you rather than do it themselves at the same time. Then have them do the movements and watch how things go. Anything you notice that needs rectifying, do so at this stage.

It can be a good idea after all the learning to have people join hands and focus in the heart before the dance begins especially if the learning has been a long process. This will help you as leader too.

Remember that actually leading the dance happens while the dance itself happens. All the above preliminaries do set the scene and the better we can do this then the more likelihood that the dance itself will be a great experience. One is aware of how the energy of the dance unfolds; one guides things along to help people deepen in the dance and gradually one learns the most effective methods. One opens out to the whole circle in an energetic sense. One is not attempting to control the dance rather one is holding the space for whatever experience can unfold for this group of people in this moment. And of course the practices we will work with during our time together on the course will be these very things that will help one develop along these lines. Breath, sound, voice, rhythm etc.

You will already be aware of various tools for helping to weave the energy of a dance, such as having men sing, women sing, on the breath, singing softly, singing full voice etc. Remember that these are simply tools that when used skillfully can enhance the dance experience. They are not a formula that is learned by rote. They can be overdone, especially men, women, on the breath, so don't think that they have to be done in every dance you lead. In general I draw upon such tools more at the beginning of a session. I will do more alternating of voices at this stage as this helps the process move along more quickly but as the session progresses whether a day or a weekend then I will do this less and less.

One need not feel any sense of apprehension concerning the first dance leading session or any session subsequently for that matter. Nobody will be judging you. As dancers people will place themselves under your guidance for the particular dance and will be there to support your learning experience. And of course when one dances, one also does this for one's colleagues.

One is not expected to be a great dance leader when one starts. One gradually learns one's craft. In general one is one's own worst critic. Be gentle with yourself. Learn from one's own experience what works well and what perhaps needs more refining.

On with the dance!  
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