

Elements of Mastery

Dance Leading and the Elements of Mastery

By Tansen Philip O'Donohoe

This article continues an Elements of Mastery column in our e-newsletter in which we explore the art, craft and spiritual practice of Dance leading and mentoring. Mentors are invited to submit their reflections on this topic to the Guidance Council.

It is just over a year now since the Guidance Council presented the Elements of Mastery to dance leaders. It is of great interest to me personally how people may have since incorporated these Elements of Mastery into their work with the dances. Perhaps it will be of interest for you to hear some of the ways that this dance leader has both consciously and unconsciously worked to uncover the gifts offered especially through breath, sound and heart that combine to produce a finely tuned human instrument for the dances.

In 1988 I began to lead the dances and since 1992, when as Saadi commented I took the “shock therapy route”, I have done so as my main occupation. It has been a most joyful journey and a great way to live. One acknowledges one’s blessings every day. The dances were a sudden awakening. I knew right away that they were going to be my life’s work and that I was prepared to do whatever it took to become a dance leader similar to two great masters of our art that I had met around this time, Saadi Neil Douglas Klotz and Amida Harvey. The decision to do this was one thing; the reality of bridging the gap between where I stood when I first began to lead and how Saadi and Amida worked was indeed considerable and would clearly take time and effort to overcome.

I seemed relatively well suited to this path being a competent guitarist, a relatively good singer and in my youth I had danced a

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lot. For some years I had been a serious yoga practitioner, studied mantra yoga and practiced meditation. I also taught groups these things. All this was good preparation yet apparently was not enough. How did Saadi and Amida do it? How did they get the dances to flow? It seemed pretty natural and easy to them. Outwardly I could see how they explained, sang, demonstrated movements etc. I could feel the atmosphere they created and developed among the dancers as sessions progressed. During the dances I knew that things were going on but I couldn’t quite understand this mysterious process even though I could swim freely in this glorious experience as a dancer.

After lots of study and practice at dance leading eventually things began to settle down within and I began to feel more confident that I could get the dances to work. These early years were still largely focused on learning the various, melodies, embodying the mantras and connecting seamlessly with the dance movements. There were daily practices with sound, breath and heart. Before coming across the dances intoning various mantras and sacred phrases had been a daily practice for several years; as had yogic pranayama practices. The heart was less developed even though my main focus for the sound was in the heart. Things began to change in the heart with the Sufi initiation in 1989.

Nothing fancy or complicated needed to be done with such practices; simple presence and showing up every day. For sound; intoning sounds in long tones; feeling the sound itself; feeling the instrument of the sound; varying the tones and how they resonate on different centers of the physical body and the energy bodies. Feeling the effects of such of such sounds, over and over, each day, gradually offering refinement. The inner sounds, the anahata nadam, Hu presented themselves in stages. Sound is breath amplified so the sound practices also helped to refine the breath. Additionally I worked with breathing in the heart, the element purification breaths and simple rhythmic breathing. These are simple yet profound practices offering galaxies of discovery and I began this journey of exploration. Understand that for me these breath practices were simple after the more complex pranayams yet they began to offer greater insights. Clearing the heart of impressions took a while to feel like I was getting somewhere given the overloaded and distorted emotional patterns that surfaced and dispersed. Additionally I focused on other Sufi practices given by my Guide.

I did work too with all aspects of the walks and this line of practice can never be over-estimated. Without all this study it is unlikely that I would have developed enough sensitivity simply by leading dances especially as one is not able to lead dances often enough.

Back to the dance circle itself. As the heart and mind relaxed into the whole process I began to feel and sense more of what was going on within me, beyond me, in the dance circle and in the sphere. The whole process of singing the sacred phrases, awareness of flow of breath within and the ocean of breath without, feeling the resonance in the heart, moving in the rhythm of the particular dance, playing guitar in the rhythms that matched these other things precisely; all came together during the dance. Now I began to feel like I was in my element.

One of the greatest blessings I learned draw upon came from attunement to my mentor and Sufi guide, Saadi. From consciously getting into his rhythm and breath while in his physical presence and especially during the dances and walks it seemed to be an effortless thing to feel the heart connection and his rhythm any other time. So that often while leading dances, especially his dances, spontaneously one could feel oneself being animated and literally moved by him. Initially this was slightly disconcerting to witness as it felt as if one had somehow been displaced and another aspect of self was acting through one. I know for sure that I would not have been able to develop in this work without my connection to Saadi and this has served me well until this day. This surrendering of self allowed me to transcend my limited self and paved the way for other things to come to and through one. Being grounded in such a connection to a being I know personally meant that when feeling the presence of Murshid SAM, Hazrat Inayat Khan or even Jesus or Chenrezig, beings that I never knew physically, this also was a comfortable, egoless feeling.

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The work with the Elements of Mastery still goes on and has been unfolding continuously over the years. The dance experience is never static and neither can a dance leader be so. Each time I lead a session of dances is a new, living experience. Breath, sound and heart for me are still the main vehicles for the receiving and transmission of energies within the dance. A big heart and an expansive breath seem to be how things work in the dances now. Other things flow from these in my experience. Through sensing, intuition and inklings one moves along. Responding in the moment with the appropriate dance or practice rather than having a clear sense of what one will lead or which direction one will take. I never prepare dance sessions and stand in the circle at the beginning of a session and hear through intuition what dance comes to lead in that moment. I trust this and always act upon it. At the end of that dance I listen again and so on through a whole weekend or however long the group is together.

During the dances one responds moment to moment to the energy that is created within the circle and one guides or rides the process accordingly. Through breath one can wordlessly transmit one's thought to the dancers that can be responded to when everyone is attuned. Through heart one can expand the feeling to the circle. When surrendered to simply being an instrument for the best possible experience with the dance circle in the moment this is not a question of ego or manipulation of others. One is taking responsibility for guiding the experience without any individual agenda. One works from where one's dancers are and not where one might want to be one's self. This means that depth of the dance experience may be limited to the capacity of the dancers notwithstanding that their realization may of course exceed one's own. Like any spiritual practice it takes time to educate and train participants. We can't force it. When the dancers are ready the mystery and the mastery appear.

For me the dance is the complete experience, not a preliminary practice. As a group exercise it is unparalleled in my estimation. As practitioners my feeling is that we have yet only scratched the surface of what yet may be possible inwardly and outwardly. The legacy we have of Murshid SAM's rich body of work still points the way ahead.

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Saadi wrote to me back in 1992. I firmly believe that we must use all the resources we have available – and the Dances are a powerful and artistic tool – to help transform this culture into one which honors the Earth and all the Beings and Species upon it. This is the real Bodhisattva path and is not conducive to “hiding out” in our small circles of people who are already convinced.

On a recent week-long personal retreat it began to dawn upon me that there could be a new direction with the dances that could begin to unfold. Mostly I have been concentrating on things in similar ways for the past 20 years with the classes, camps, workshop formats and dance trainings albeit in many different countries. I have been perfecting and refining those things but essentially I am still concerned with the same

somewhat limited ways of working. A bigger vision to get behind would certainly be an inspiration for the next 20 years of my life. Inshallah may this come to pass. Use me for the purpose that Thy Wisdom chooses.



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