

Elements of Mastery:

Dances of Innocence, Dances of Experience

by Neil Douglas-Klotz

When we talk about *mastering* the Dances of Universal Peace, we might assume that our beautiful practice is like a door we wish to enter and that we simply need to find which keys fit. Perhaps that's true when we begin to learn the original Dances of Murshid Samuel L. Lewis, which hold a great deal of his direct transmission and *baraka*. But Murshid really left us an "unfinished symphony." The Dances have changed and evolved over the past 45 years. As they change, they prompt further change in us. Looking back as well as ahead might help us see more clearly the challenges and opportunities we face today.

"What must remain is the sacred phrase...." Given Murshid's expression of the centerpoint, the number of phrases exploded rapidly in the first ten years. The original Dances mainly represented the Sufi and Hindu traditions, although Murshid clearly planned for more but did not complete them (for instance, a sketch for the "Moon Dance of Goddess Isis," which appears in his writings). In the first decade, we saw new Dances birthed representing the Zoroastrian, Buddhist, Sikh, Hebrew, and Christian (Aramaic and Greek) traditions with some tentative attempts to honor native traditions.

These new outer doorways, however, opened new inner worlds. Concentrating on an unknown sacred phrase requires one to confront the depths of oneself in a new way. Each "tradition" carries a bundle of impressions, full of both light and shadow. When a person has the courage to ask, "use us for the purpose that Thy wisdom chooses," this necessarily includes the willingness to face what might arise within oneself from the reflection of that part of humanity in the soul's mirror. Chants that go deep require more than words, music and movements. They evoke a feeling-attunement, a type of channeling that can be the equivalent of the shamanic journeying of pre-religious cultures. This why we always experience long-lasting mantric Dances more strongly when led by the originator, or someone who has danced frequently with her/him. The inner pathway that the Dance creates is like a vapor trail in the unseen; the words, music and movements are like the Zen "finger pointing to the moon."

When one approaches a phrase from the ancient world, one that has no living religious tradition, one can be opening a proverbial Pandora's box. It is much easier to sing a pleasant English song that appeals to the emotions, for instance, than look Hathor in the eye. One can find oneself needing to literally "heal" an archetype before it is redeemed and shared. C.G. Jung wrote about his experience of this process:

If the archetype, which is universal, i.e., identical with itself always and anywhere, is properly dealt with in one place only, it is influenced as a whole, i.e., simultaneously and everywhere. Thus an old alchemist gave the following consolation to one of his disciples: 'No matter how isolated you are and how lonely you feel, if you do your work truly and conscientiously, unknown friends will come and seek you.' It seems to me that nothing essential has ever been lost, because its matrix is ever present with us and from this it can and will be reproduced if needed. But those who can recover it have learned the art of averting their eyes from the blinding light of current opinions and close their ears to the noise of ephemeral slogans."

--From Miguel Serrano, *C.G. Jung and Hermann Hesse: A Record of Two Friendships*.

There is a reason, for instance, why no one has wanted to take up the Norse-Scandinavian god/goddess tradition, given its history of misuse by National Socialists in the 20th century. Yet this, and similar work remains to be done, if we have the courage to undertake it.

Likewise we have discovered that when a native tradition feels itself oppressed and colonized, it can see someone outside the lineage chanting its phrases as just another manifestation of cultural theft. "First liberate us, then we'll hold hands in the same circle you do." Most Dancers may not understand how their "universalism" can be seen as oppressive, yet it's something to which we need to be sensitive.

Looking back, expanding the range of chants and traditions also required that we widen the range of movements and genres of music used. In Dances that penetrate deeply into the psyche, the movements are not mere decorations layered over pleasing music. They articulate the feeling of the sacred phrase in a powerful, non-verbal way. This required Dance leaders (who dared) to go deeply into their own body awareness and discover the roots of holding, rigidity, presence and absence that prevent them from responding authentically to the transformational effect of a phrase. What is an authentically *free* movement? Similarly, new types of music helped us express new depths of feeling inherent in sacred phrases. The overall effect can accomplish a type of psychic surgery in one's soul. We can go still further in this direction.

We also learned that merely adding more fast breathing and quick energy did not always cause lasting change, at least not for the better. If dancers wish to skate on the surface, experiencing only the "buzz" or "high" of a new Dance, then they might miss the opportunity to allow the surgery to work. The self of habit (which the Sufis call the *nafs*) can quickly adapt to any new experience without change. "Wherever you go, there you are." For years, people fled the Dances to join Sufi zikr groups, often because they didn't want to feel the prodding to look at the variety of their inner world, the foibles and fables that make us who we think we are. Zikr, like a "pure wine" washes all of that variety away and can allow us to see ourselves more

objectively, from the point of view of Unity. But zikr, too, can be experienced as only a surface “high.” And in all cases the self returns, waiting to be dealt with. Somehow or other our soul-force wants to witness more of life’s perfection – the so-called divine attributes – in all of our desires, needs, celebrations and complaints. Alternatively, the self can divert itself chasing the rainbow outside in new forms of addictive activity.

The growth of the Dances from less than 25 to more than a thousand may seem uncontrolled. No doubt, some Dances stay for a season then disappear like flowers that don’t self-seed. But where Dances remain they have arisen in response to specific cries from the soul of humanity. The early Dances channelled *baraka* and life energy; they addressed a real need for Murshid S.A.M.’s early circles to explore the inner life with love, power and effervescence in community--“joy without drugs.”

Like the process I described above – turning from outer variety to inner – the next generation of Dances began to touch very human, everyday life experiences. Not the ‘peak’ experiences but the the ‘trough’ ones: grieving, feeling confused and acknowledging parts of one’s subconscious that had been neglected. As we expanded beyond the circles that birthed the Dances and Walks, we began to engage those in therapy, halfway houses, addiction programs, and a variety of gender, sexual equality and protest movements. And in fact, many of us were them or became them.

We also expanded outwardly to different countries. The Dances brought us together in a type of “spiritual Esperanto” – a shared feeling-language beyond our usual languages and cultures. That created (and creates) a burst of life energy when one leads them in a new country. But again, paralleling the “settling” process I described above, in the next phase we began (or in some cases, are beginning) to acknowledge the very real differences in various cultures and the unique gifts and burdens that each carries in its “group nafs.” In this phase, we must leave behind the inner (and perhaps unconscious) identification as a universalist missionary and be present to see the very real and often nitty-gritty needs we face when we are away from home. Perhaps it’s better to help one group or a few in which one invests time in learning the language and culture, than hop from country to country gleaning adulation and new highs. Better the slow organic compost than the quick, inorganic growth stimulant.

What about looking ahead a bit? How does the future call to us now? What challenges face us as we seek to keep the Dances living rather than as a parody of their past?

The early Dances featured the simple, acoustic folk music of the 1970s and the people that gathered in person to celebrate it. That era has passed, and we are challenged by a culture that values highly-processed, digitized music, largely manufactured by media combines and shared virtually. One finds hope in the indie and world music scenes, which keep the vitality and creativity of live music vibrant.

Can we stop imitating or cloning Dances that worked in the past and genuinely allow new forms of music to transmit the living essence of sacred phrases today? Even zikr can become a form of 'creative anachronism,' a sterile performance art, if we don't allow real feeling *now* to take us in new directions of the soul. Authentic feeling always communicates, heart to heart and soul to soul, as Hazrat Inayat Khan says.

Equally challenging is the increasing phobia to simple touch in Western culture. This is inculcated into everyone for fear of being labelled 'abusive.' No doubt, decades of real physical abuse have been covered up, especially on the part of celebrity and authority figures (both popular and spiritual). However, this does not negate the need of human beings to learn simple, compassionate touch--not pushing or pulling, not taking from a person more than they want to give nor giving them more than they want to receive. The Dances have a great potential for teaching this type of somatic hygiene, if we can create the conditions where people feel safe to simply join hands. The 20th century psychologist Wilhelm Reich noted in the 1930s that totalitarian governments assert their authority first by discouraging or prohibiting people from reaching out and connecting – physically – with one another. Text-to-text does not carry the power of body-to-body. Repeatedly, recent research shows that the younger generation is taking fewer drugs (mind-altering or otherwise), having less sex, feeling more depressed and doing more self-harming than any previous one. All of this reflects an ever-increasing emphasis on virtual rather than in-person, embodied life.

Paralleling this, world interfaith movements in much of the world have become increasingly 'balkanized,' for want of a better word. Instead of being willing to eat and pray (much less dance) with one another, interfaith representatives appear on panels representing fixed positions that attempt to exaggerate differences rather than find common ground. This belies the fact that in the real world, there are multiple Buddhisms, Christianities, Islams, etc. And on the grassroots level, as Hazrat Inayat Khan noted trenchantly, every person is really his or her own religion. One poll showed that slightly less than half of the people in the US feel that organized religion is a big problem in the world, and the other half feel that their own organized religion is the *only* way. Where I live in the UK, and in Western Europe in general, there are now many more people who identify with 'none of the above' than with any named religious or spiritual tradition. Can we begin to contemplate something like 'secular spirituality' in any sense of real depth rather than intellectual lip service? Without being a caricature, what would a secular spiritual Dance look (sound or feel) like?

Likewise, even within our 'home' tradition of Sufism, we find a much greater variety in the world today. We enjoy and celebrate our flavor of universal Sufism. Yet not every Sufi in the world is a universalist, Rumi-loving, pacifist. Some genuine mystics, like the Christian liberation theologians of South America, must live under intense cultural and political oppression. They need to go deep in one well rather than dig many. For instance, a Middle Eastern Sufi sheikh in exile might be holding

together a community's whole culture and manner in the hope of returning home when the influence of Islamism wains. Other Sufis (for instance in Bangladesh) have formed political parties, which disagree greatly with one another. Others are involved in armed liberation movements of one sort or another (as are Aramaic Christians in northern Iraq). It's safe to say that not all Sufis are mystics, not all mystics are Sufis and many genuine mystics – of any label – may not feel they have the luxury to outwardly proclaim universalism. A Westerner trying to force-feed it to them may not understand that for the potential recipient it comes with baggage ranging from McDonalds to the World Bank. And that can be life-threatening, depending on where one lives.

All these current trends challenge our usual way of 'doing' the Dances of Universal Peace. What opportunities does the world today present?

Well, the digital era not only takes away, the digital era gives. Without the advent of email about thirty years ago, we could never have built the international Dance Network. The new tools have allowed us to make recordings, videos and descriptions of the Dances available much more widely and much quicker than ever before. The new tools also allow people to connect with one another more easily or to find a Dance circle.

On a deeper level, the development of the internet itself only expresses humanity's nascent desire to *feel* globally, to recognize suffering on the other side of the world and to realize that we live in one, interconnected ecosystem called the earth. Can we allow these real concerns, which reach beyond and beneath established 'religions,' to begin to shape new types of Dances and Walks? Can these practices assist human souls to find authentic journeys of return that do not merely focus on outer conditions, but help transform their inner experiences into realization? Are we prepared to be channels for Dances that redeem the inner ecology, that evoke the "zero-point field" or that celebrate the cellular membrane (see epigenetics)?

This is not simply a matter of making up new English phrases that offer humanist ideology in honey-coated music and movements. That's already been tried and found lacking. As I indicated, many old mantric phrases wait to be explore, redeemed and shared. But we can also use established phrases with new attunements (for instance, traditional Sufi zikr is being used with an ecological attunement in Islamic boarding schools throughout Indonesia). Are we willing to, as Joe Miller used to say, *really feel* without sentimentality? That would call for something akin to Murshid Samuel Lewis's practice, which originally helped spark the Dances:

"When I saw 600,000 homeless in Karachi, I went almost mad (or maybe it was becoming sane) – what to do! The events leading to mass hysteria and migrations still go on and will go on, undisturbed by any and all political philosophies or whomsoever. An editorial never saved anybody's life, and editorials have led to wars and massacres." (September 26, 1962, *Sufi Vision and Initiation*, p. 313.)

Imagine that Murshid lived before instant, global news feeds via the internet. Now we are exposed to similar suffering on our screens every day, and blogs and tweets one-a-penny. What would he do? More importantly, what do we do, or more accurately, what is *ours* to do? Instead of “joy without drugs,” perhaps what we need today from the Dances is “hope and courage without sedatives.” An alternative response would be to mouse-click and change the page, but that weakens our concentration and quickly erodes our ability to stay with one feeling longer.

We can easily become side-tracked in either idealism or despair. By outer conditions, which sometimes seem dire, or by the inner world, which offers a lifetime of psychological (pre)occupation. Perhaps the ability to hold all these opposites in our hearts a bit longer, breathing “Toward the One,” would free up some hidden life energy that is currently tied up in pushing one or the other extreme away.

We can be comforted (mildly) that this is simply the human condition. For instance, William Blake, the 18th century English visionary poet, embraced both sides of life and expressed it creatively in verse. In “Songs of Innocence (1789),” Blake writes tender, idealistic lines like:

*Little lamb who made thee
Dost thou know who made thee
Gave thee life & bid thee feed
By the stream and o'er the mead....*

And:

*All must love the human form
In heathen, turk or jew.
Where Mercy, Love & Pity dwell
There God is dwelling too.*

In his “Songs of Experience,” he changes his tune:

*Cruelty has a Human Heart
And Jealousy a Human Face
Terror, the Human Form Divine
And Secrecy the Human Dress.*

And:

*Tyger, Tyger, burning bright,
In the forests of the night;
What immortal hand or eye,
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?
...
When the stars threw down their spears*

*And water'd heaven with their tears:
Did he smile his work to see?
Did he who made the lamb make thee?*

Can we face the world as it is and respond creatively, with what is truly ours to do? The Dances have helped millions of people, but lives changed are not measured on any economic or social network index. Might not a healthy goal be to help a few people and help ourselves at the same time, avoiding both grandiosity and self-abasement?

Can we move with both our dances of innocence and our dances of experience? If we can, while smiling at and in the world, then perhaps we can begin to talk about *mastering* the Dances of Universal Peace.

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Neil Douglas-Klotz co-founded the International Network for the Dances of Universal Peace in 1982 together with Murshida Tasnim Fernandez of the Sufi Order International, a project blessed and encouraged by Pir Moineddin Jablonski, the spiritual successor of Murshid Samuel Lewis. The project launched a network and resource center for a wider circle of those wishing to share the Dances and Walks worldwide.



Saadi and Tasnim also co-founded the original Mentor Teachers Guild and co-wrote the original guidelines for training and certification as well as the ethical agreements. They initiated the first camp solely dedicated to the Dances and Walks, which was held at Lama Foundation in New Mexico in August 1984, and also developed the training model still used today by many Dance mentors. Saadi has been the channel for more than a hundred Dances, including about 40 from the Aramaic words of Jesus. Over the past 33 years he has presented the Dances and Walks at many conferences and colloquia internationally and was the first to take the Dances to Russia in 1988. He continues to experiment with pushing the envelope of what the Dances can express to help humanity express the "hidden treasure." He is the author of a number of books on Middle Eastern mysticism including *Prayers of the Cosmos* and *The Sufi Book of Life* and is also a Murshid in the Sufi Ruhaniat International.