11-11-2007

Defining the Spiritual Aspects in the Pure Dance of Bharata Natyam

Bevin Stark

Skidmore College

Follow this and additional works at: http://creativematter.skidmore.edu/mals_stu_schol

Part of the Asian History Commons, and the Dance Commons

Recommended Citation

Defining the Spiritual Aspects in the Pure Dance of Bharata

Natyam

By

Bevin Stark

FINAL PROJECT SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS
IN LIBERAL STUDIES

SKIDMORE COLLEGE

August 2007

Advisors: Dr. Isabel Brown, Dr. Joel Smith
Defining the Spiritual Aspects in the Pure Dance of Bharata Natyam.

Table of Contents.

Abstract........................................................................................................3
Introduction..................................................................................................5

Section I.  Tantric Philosophy Summarized and Pertinent Tools Defined..15

Section II. Kundalini Yoga Philosophy and Pertinent Tools Defined.......20

Section III: Brief History of Bharata Natyam........................................23

Section IV: Indian Aesthetics and Conception of Beauty.......................36

Section V.  Formal Structure of Bharata Natyam....................................39

Basic Postures..........................................................................................40

Adavus.........................................................................................................41

Dance Items..............................................................................................47

Section VI: Testimonials............................................................................49

Section VII. Conclusion...........................................................................58

Work Cited ..............................................................................................64

Appendix

A: Excerpt from Cilappatikaram

(Atikal, Canto III. 10-170, p.34-40).......................................................67

B: Single and Double Hand Gestures Used in Bharata Natyam

Referencing Important Dance Texts

Noting Corresponding Color and Deity.................................................72
Abstract

Bharata natyam is herald as a sacred art. The goal of all traditional Indian arts is to evoke rasa (a tasting of spiritual bliss) in the artist as well as the spectator. I have personally experienced a spiritual power while performing and practicing this ancient dance form. Bharata natya has two main aspects to its dance presentation: natya (story-telling), and nrtta (pure dance technique). The natya portion clearly nurtures devotional feelings and religious contemplation by retelling stories of the gods, of the great Hindu epics and of myths. This study focuses on the subtle role that the nrtta portion of the dance plays in the cultivation of rasa. I have always felt that there must be some great purpose behind the actual technique of bharata natyam, its severe geometry and unnatural positions of the body.

The connections between kundalini yoga, tantric philosophy, and bharata natyam are numerous. All are ancient traditions that developed within secret societies where a guru (teacher) imparted information as the shaisha (student) became ready to receive. The human body is the medium through which each strives to achieve union with the Divine. Common tools of mudra (stylized hand gestures), mantra (repetition of sacred syllables), and asana (body positions) are prevalent in each practice, but are they used in the same way? I propose that nrtta of bharata natyam does use these tools with a tantric and kundalini intent to direct energy and attention toward the realization of a spiritual union. I suggest that the mudras in nrtta channel and direct energy to balance the gross and subtle bodies as in kundalini yoga. I further propose that the body itself becomes a
dynamic yantra focusing the dancer's and the audience's attention alternating between involution to the center (Brahman) and evolution (simulating cosmic time) mirroring the use of tantric yantras. Lastly I suggest that the sollukattu (pneumonic syllables) that the dancer internalizes while learning adavus (basic dance steps) function as mantra, repetition changing vibration and signifying proper meter and pause.
Introduction

Traditional Indian arts were not mere works of art for personal indulgence or self-promotion. These arts were intended as a spiritual path whose highest goal was to lead the artist and sensitive audience into union with the Divine (Vatsyayan 5). The artist strove to attain the experience of ananda (spiritual bliss in union with the Divine), and to lead the rasika (sensitive observer, one equipped for the tasting of ananda) to this same bliss, however fleeting. This was the goal of all traditional Indian arts. Success of the art was considered if and only if this purpose was accomplished (Vatsyayan 5). At this point the art would be considered aesthetically pleasing. An entire theory of rasa (tasting of this ananda) developed to guide the traditional artists in this journey. Rules of rasa theory are enumerated throughout the entire text of the Natya Shastra of Bharata Muni (200 B.C.E-200 C.E.), a primary source of dramatic theory.

Basic Indian philosophy touts a multileveled approach to life which embraces purpose for each act and each being with an understanding that all beings are progressing on their spiritual path at their own pace. It is believed that any worthy act draws one closer to realization of oneness with the Divine. This philosophy, integrated into the Indian consciousness presumes that common ideas are comprehended at a depth appropriate for the individual’s spiritual readiness. The Natya Shastra supports this philosophy with the following. “The drama teaches the path of Virtue to those who carry on their duty; the modes of love to those eager to get it fulfilled; it admonishes the uncivilized and the ill-natured
ones; encourages self-control of those who are amenable to discipline; makes the coward bold; the heroic ones are given more incentives, the men of poor intellect are enlightened and the wisdom of the learned is enhanced”(108-109). The research for this study utilizes this basic multileveled philosophy while striving to understand the path that *bharata natyam* takes toward this spiritual goal. This path lays beneath the surface entertainment for which *bharata natyam* is currently recognized.

*Bharata natyam* is a traditional Indian art that has survived with its basic form intact for centuries. Dance as physically portrayed in the sculpture of ancient temples resembles the structural form of present day *bharata natyam*. This intriguing dance form is appreciated for its ornate costume, intricate rhythms, statuesque posses, and for the retelling of Hindu myths and epics.

Heralded as a sacred art, the success of *bharata natyam* in cultivating Hindu devotion and religious contemplation can be aptly understood through the *natya* (story telling) portion of this dance. The *nrtta* (pure, non-story-telling) portion of the dance is an equally significant component of *bharata natyam*. *Nrtta* items begin and end the traditional *margam* (order of types of dance items) as developed by the Tanjore brothers at the turn of the nineteenth century. For twenty-two years of my life I have been a student, performer and observer of *bharata natyam*. In depth analysis, studies and personal experience have led me to believe that it is here, in the pure technique that a spiritual journey surpassing the confines of a singular religious dimension will be found.
The basic technique of *bharata natyam* is extremely angular. The center of gravity is lowered into the womb area and the movements are earthbound with very few leaps. The surrounding space of the dancer is defined by the perimeter of the movement of the limbs thus creating the body as the focal point. Fingertips are extended and feet flexed however the energy of movement does not extend endlessly into space but appear to circulate around the dancer. The dancer’s legs turn outward, hips stretched horizontally; arms extend horizontally and then rotate back at shoulders level creating an opening of the body and an energized tension while maintaining this very geometric structure. Eye movements and highly codified hand gestures are given great importance in both the *natya* and the *nrtta* portions of *bharata natyam*.

The ancient traditions of *Tantric* philosophy, *kundalini* yoga and *bharata natyam* developed at the same time with evidence of significant contact. Each of these practices emphasizes the use of geometry, *mudra* (hand gestures), *mantra* and the worship of deities using the human body as the arena for spiritual journey toward union with the divine.

My first semester at Skidmore College, Professor Isabel Brown introduced me to *bharata natyam* through a dance appreciation course. As an observer I was immediately intrigued and moved by this dance form. Twenty-two years as a student and performer of *bharata natyam* has led me to my own study and theory behind the mechanism of this dance. Through personal practice I have experienced significant shifts of energy expanding through my extremities and condensing toward my core. At times the energy swirls in the womb area creating
an uncomfortable, non-sexual agitation, while at other times the flow of energy has come together smoothly resulting in a release of muscular tension and effortless dancing. As a result quietness overtakes the mind while the body moves within a wellspring of energy without conscious effort or mind-full intervention.

An experience in Chidambaram temple in 1989 was an epiphany. Philosophically, the term Chidambaram is translated as the heart of the cosmos where the lord dances. The temple here is dedicated to Siva as the Nataraja, Lord of the dance. I danced Allaripu, an nrtta (pure dance) item, within these walls directly in front the formless representation of Siva. During the dance, a very intense flow of energy swirled throughout my body. This sensation congregated at my spine, condensed into powerful foci behind the navel, dropped, and exploded catapulting this energy up and outward beyond my physical body, flooding through me a light bliss. This effervescing bliss continued to shower my physical body. Joyful tears streamed down my face. The physical and emotional aspects mended together as one thus displaying that my spirit surpassed the limits of my physical body and in that instant I had an understanding of unity. These shifts in energy were spontaneous and evolved without conscious intent or understanding of ananda. Years later this first experience remains crystal clear and tangible. My recent studies have led me to an account of a kundalini awakening that parallels my experience. Field research for this study has revealed that others have had similar experiences.

Tantric philosophy and kundalini yoga practice have long used a distinct methodology of mantra, mudra, asana and the worship of deities as tools toward
union with the Divine. This research explores how these same tools are employed by *bharata natyam*. Congruent backgrounds in development of each practice are considered to respect exposure and possible influence one may have had on another. It is noted that scholars have hinted at the several correlations between these techniques. An assimilation of these correlations will direct a speculative, though supported, theory of the source of spiritual potency in *bharata natyam*. It is my hypothesis that *nṛtta* technique of *bharata natyam* utilizes *mantra*, *mudra*, and geometric body positions in a *tantric* and *kundalini* way. The results of this study will lead to a multi-layered understanding of this art’s journey towards union with the divine. The present day effectiveness of this journey when spiritual focus takes a backseat to commercialism is contemplated.

Dr. Vatsyayan has stated that in traditional Indian arts “the work of art is the *yantra*---the device through which the *sadhaka* (artist) sees the vision of the Absolute as much as the audience to whom the work of art is presented” (Vatsyayan 9). This author emphasizes the importance of the physical structure of art. Hindu temples, following *Agamic* (*tantric*) texts are constructed as a *yantra*. It was within this physical and symbolic *yantra* that *devadasi* (ritualistic dancers) worshiped their deity. The spiritual space is defined. The *Agamic* connection intensifies with the knowledge that the *hastas* (hand gestures) of *bharata natyam* developed from the *mudras* (hand gestures specifically believed to bring down divine energy) used ritually by Hindu priest (Sarabhai 3). Dr. Feuerstein, a yogic historian, supports this interrelationship between *Tantric mudras* and *mudras* used in Indian dance but states that the origin of the *mudras*
of Tantric practice is obscure, a cross-fertilization with dance could not be ruled out (478). Dr. Marglin reveals the ritualistic dance of the devadasi (temple dancers), their periods of purity, and the fact that gurus whispered a sacred mantra into the dancer’s ear at the time of initiation (58). This giving of mantra (spiritually charged syllables or words) again links the dance to a spiritual practice.

*Vastusutra Upanisad, The Essence of Form in Sacred Art,* discusses the art of sacred sculpture. Stone and metal sculptures of Gods and Goddesses are believed to house the god spirit and are used in worship. Purification rituals of the stone are performed with sacred chanting and the drawing of a marman, the symbolism of the bindu (center point) around which a panjara (yantra) is drawn in strict procedure. It begins with lines that determine the “essential configuration” of the piece “giving its fundamental disposition and movements in space” (Boner 3). “In Pippalads’s conception [he states that] the language of form is equivalent to the spoken or written word, giving expression to a vision of Divine Truth touching the deepest mysteries of Existence” (Boner 3).

Centuries later artists continue to follow this exact procedure. Pippalada answers a devotee’s question of what a panjara is with the exclamation that it was known in the Dvapara Yuga (the age before present day in Hindu cyclical conception of time) but that it is unknown in the Kali Yuga (present cycle in Hindu conception of time). Boner believes that this statement indicates that the panjaralyantra used in sculpture was “no simple technical device for producing good and harmonious compositions, but a secret and sacred knowledge which
enabled the sculptor to produce images that not only were of perfect form, but
could convey a spiritual message to the devotee”(Boner 34). The true meaning
behind the *panjara* may not be understood to present day sculptors, but the
“general principles of concentric composition, transmitted by tradition seems to
be rooted in their subconscious”(Boner 34). A lack of understanding behind the
power of the diagram would rightly diminish the concentration on the goal while
producing the diagram. Boner believes that without concentrated intent the result
of subconscious identification would be diluted but would never the less persists
(34). I suggest that the same may be true of the *nrīta* portion of *bharata natyam.*
If the structural technique of *bharata natyam* has its foundation in cosmic
connection and spiritual direction but is not adequately understood in this age, the
true purpose of the art will not be backed with meaning-full intent. Likewise the
recognition and journey may remain though diluted.

Significantly, the *Vastusutra Upanisad* also recognizes that visual and
auditory stimulation has a greater impact on the spiritual soul than arguing
philosophical truths. This cues a spontaneous subconscious identification to the
natural symbolism rooted in the cosmic truths that we are all subject to (Boner 6,
7). *Vastusutra Upanisad* explains that ornament placement is necessary in order
to draw one’s attention from the anatomical structure (human form) of the image
and to emphasize the “geometric or decorative patterns”(Boner 28). “Ornaments
assume a great importance, since they are efficient means for creating a feeling of
divine presence”(28). *Bharata natyam* dancers adorn each *cakra,* aesthetically
drawing in the observer’s awareness to these centers in the dancer’s body.
Additionally, golden bangles and shiny bells draw additional attention to points on the wrists and ankles resulting in an overlay of geometric patterns on the dancer’s body. Activity of the dance creates a dynamic overlapping of these geometric patterns emphasizing an involution to and evolution from the center. This is the same exercise achieved by the yantra of tantric philosophy.

*Kundalini* yoga tradition believes that we are each comprised of gross, subtle and ethereal bodies. The aspirant uses angles of *asana* (body positions) to stimulate glandular function that aids in the cleansing and balancing of the physical body. *Mudras* (hand gestures) are technical tools used to hold, move and direct energy. This direction of energy is used to balance energy of the subtle body and remove energy blocks. In *kundalini* yoga tradition the *ida* (lunar/female current) and *pingala* (solar/male current) run in helical fashion around the *sushumna* (central current) of the subtle body. *Cakras* (energy centers) are formed where these lunar and solar currents cross at the *sushumna*. Each *cakra* is associated with a particular color, deity and seed *mantra*. Mantra (spiritually charged syllables or words) is understood to be a direct connection to the Divine. Repetition of *mantra* is believed to create a vibration change within the aspirant that brings them into alignment with the vibrations of the infinite.

In addition to the ornaments placed at each of the *cakra* centers, the dancer additionally adorns their head with gem-studded ornaments representing the sun and the moon. The placement of these ornaments corresponds to the solar and lunar channels of *kundalini* yoga. White stones divide the sun and the moon in a linear pattern, drawing one’s attention to the dancer’s crown (*Sahasrara cakra*)
abode of united Siva and Sakti) where a dominating stone studded circular ornament (rakkodhi) in placed.

Kersenboon aptly equates the subtle kundalini body with the architecture of a Hindu temple and states that the practice of kundalini yoga mirrors the devotee’s worship at the temple. The dancer and the aspirant each honors various deities on their path to unite with the Divine (96). Similarly, Balasaraswati equates the margam (traditional order of items in a bharata natyam program) with a devotee’s visit to the temple. (qtd. in Kothari 103). This suggests that a bharata natyam program has the same effect as a kundalini yogi’s practice and a devotee’s worship in the temple. This being said, I urge you to remember that the temples were constructed under the direction of agamic texts in yantric formation. These same texts codified the ritual worship performed within these walls, thus linking kundalini yoga, tantric texts and bharata natyam.

Japa (repetition of mantra) and use of hand gestures are a common practice in daily worship of personal deities. Kolam, examples of auspicious geometric designs (yantras), of are drawn at the entrance of Hindu homes and at the site of puja each day. “Kolams are drawn to “evolve the spirit of order and harmony into the home”(Lawlor 4). Mantra, yantra, and mudra permeate daily Hindu life as ornaments as well as in personal worship. Abundant academic material supports a distinctive Tantric and kundalini use of mantra, yantra and mudra in their spiritual practices. I suggest that bharata natyam uses these same tools with identical underlying spiritual intent. Scholars have pointed to a correlation in the use and focus of these individual tools of Tantric and kundalini
with their subtle use in bharata natyam. Once gathered, these correlations will support my suggestion that nrtta of bharata natyam is a substantial spiritual source that guides dancer and spectator toward union with the divine.

I hypothesize that ritual use of angles, mudra, and mantra found in Kundalini yoga and the Tantric tradition will be found to mirror their use in bharata natyam. This research will also suggest a plausible understanding of the origin of spiritual potency that I, as well as other dancers, have experienced while practicing and observing bharata natyam. If I am correct, this layered understanding of the design of bharata natyam will give renewed respect for the traditional technique in this age of fusion.
Section I.

**Tantric Philosophy Summarized and Pertinent Tools Defined**

The term *Tantric* is a western attempt to classify several esoteric traditions that share common ritualistic tools, beliefs and sacred tests. Madhava does not mention *Tantrism* as one of the fifteen *Darshanas* (schools of worship) in his fourteenth century text *Sarvadarsanasamgraha*. *Tantric* elements were however shown to pervade these philosophies and have merged with nearly all aspects of Hindu life. Padoux believes that *Tantric* philosophy had become so pervasive by this time that it was no longer regarded a distinct system (Harper 18). Many scholars and practitioners perceive *Tantric* philosophy to be separate from, but intertwine with the Vedic tradition. This section of my study concentrates on Hindu *Tantrism* and will identify basic accepted philosophies while defining *mantra, mudra, asana, yantra* and worship of deities as they are specifically used in *Tantric* rituals and as they correlate to *bharata natyam* use.

*Tantric* philosophy encompasses rituals (repetition and systemization), *yantras* (geometric diagrams), *mantras* (recitation of sacred sounds), and *mudras* (ritualistic hand gestures) as methods to bring the aspirant closer to their inner self, the *bindu*, and union with Brahman. *Tantric* practitioners belong to oral tradition within closed societies. *Gurus* (teachers) imparted knowledge and practice to *shaishas* (students) as they became ready to receive. *Tantras, Sanskrit samhitas, and agamas*, the basic texts of the *Tantric* religion, are layered with symbolism and hidden messages making the role of *guru* essential in deciphering meanings.

*Tantrism* dates back several thousand years but came into its golden age during India’s medieval period. During the height of the *Tantric* period (C.E. 700-1200), Indian
religions became ritualistic. Sacred formulas and symbolism became important aspects of the practice and were widely used. Performance of rituals required yogic practices of meditation and concentrated visualization. Oral tradition was scribed into Tantric texts. Tantric rituals became popular and consumption of the Panca Makaras (five m’s): madya (wine), maithuna (sex), mudra (ritual gesture), matsya (consumption of fish), and mamsa (flesh) were practiced. Tantric philosophy is world oriented believing that emotional control over worldly attachment serves their journey. This differs from the Hindu ascetic who removes themselves from worldly temptation by setting off to the forest with nothing but the clothes on their back. Highly developed yantras were introduced to aid the aspirant and to “symbolize the abodes of specific aspects of the goddess” (Harper 50).

Tantrism maintains a central belief in the homology between the microcosmic and macrocosmic principles are maintained in the human body. This philosophy recognizes that a divine energy permeates the entire universe polarizing in the human body as masculine (Shiva) and feminine (Shakti). The sole aim of Tantrins is to manipulate these poles of energy into union effecting a fusion of individual consciousness with the universal consciousness. The worshiper aspires to merge with the worshiped. Particular ritualistic use of mantra, mudra, yantra, and worship of deities were the tools used to achieve this union.

Yantras are visual tools made up of mathematically precise patterns of geometric shapes bounded most often by an outer square. The perimeter of the yantra serves to define a space for spiritual contemplation. The intense process of focusing one’s attention on this marked space removes the aspirant from the routine of worldly life
creating the representation of timeless space. All that is within the parameter represents the microcosm, the subtle inner body, the sacred, and the place of divinity. All that is outside the perimeter represents the macrocosm, the mundane, and the profane. This boundary sanctifies the inner space for divine contemplation. The geometric forms within this diagram become visual representations for Indian speculative thought. Khanna suggests that yantras “function as revelatory symbols of cosmic truths and as instructional charts of the spiritual aspect of human experience”(12).

Yantras are mathematically precise patterns that use basic geometric shapes (circles, squares, triangles, and dots) (Plates 1, 2). The bindu (center dot) creates the focal point for contemplation and represents the source of all creation. This is the point of condensed energy that everything involves into and from which everything evolves out of. This is also the place where Brahman (universal consciousness) resides. Within the yantras different divinities are represented in specified arrangements through the use of seed mantras (spiritually Sanskrit syllables) or symbols. The use of concentric circles and overlaying shapes establish rhythm and movement while triangles represent the primordial shape. The primordial shape is noted as the first shape to come into existence with the fewest number of lines. The inverted triangle symbolizes the potent female energy, Shakti. The apex up triangle symbolizes the inert male energy, Siva. Superimposing these triangles represents the union of these energies and the source of all creation.

Hindu temples were architecturally constructed according to agamic texts in yantra formation. Kersenboom has further qualified yantra as “a geometrical contrivance by which any aspect of the Supreme Principle may be bound to any spot for
the purpose of worship. The *Vastupurasamandala* [temple-ground visualized as reclining body of the god] is a *yantra*, an artifice in which the ground (*bhumi*) is converted into the manifested universe”(97). The Hindu temple by design becomes a spiritual slate upon which to dance. Ritual worship reinforces the forms and begins to act as one, creating emblems of psychic power, used to control expansion of inner psychic forces (Khanna 12). Inert diagrams are transformed into power diagrams and are “endowed with a self generating propensity to transform a mundane experience into a psychic one”(Khanna 12).

*Mantras* are spiritually charged Sanskrit syllables, words or phrases. In *Tantric* philosophy *mantras* are tools of vibration. These *mantras* serve to energize the sacred space of the *yantra* when they are physically placed within the diagram or mentally recited during ritual meditation. Khanna defines *mantras* as “‘thought forms’ representing divinities or cosmic powers that exert their influence by means of vibrations and become a projection of cosmic sound” [*nada*] (21). Sanskrit letters are thought to be the seeds of *nada* and are used as a direct link to the divine. Repetition and *mantra* brings one closer to the divine experience by changing one’s vibration level. An observer hearing these sounds has the experience of having their own vibration level raised. *Tantric* adept, Bhavabhut refers to a system of *nyasa*, the purification of the body through the recitation of *mantra* (*Malati Madhava* 5.21) (Harper 50). I strongly believe that the experience of observing a *bharata natyam* performance changes the vibration of the individual. Music is a combination of vibrations. The *ragas* (intricate system of melody) of Carnatic music was created by seers to be played at particular times of day and were meant to stimulate different emotions within the listener.
Mudras are ritualistic hand gestures that act as seals believed to channel and direct divine energy. Hindu priests can be seen employing mudras in the ritual worship that was initiated in the agamic period. Bharata natyam students of the renowned institute Kalakshetra are taught that clairvoyants have seen different colors emanate from hand gestures in dance. Colors are perceived due to a change in wavelength. I conclude that the hand gestures used during dance mirror the use of tantric mudras in ritual to seal, channel and direct energy changing its vibration, hence wavelength in the process. It is interesting to note that commentaries on the Natya Shastra designate a color and a deity for most single hand gestures (see Appendix B).
Section II.

**Kundalini Yoga Philosophy and Pertinent Tools Defined**

The foundation of *kundalini* yoga, incorporated into *Sakta tantra* before the eighth century, recognizes that the supreme power of the universe resides in a dormant or static state within the human body (Harper 50). *Kundalini* yoga is a division of *Tantric* philosophy and uses the body as a platform to unite the *jivatma* (individual soul) with the *paraatma* (universal soul).

According to this yogic model, the physical human body has a subtle body of energy centers and conduits that correspond to, though do not directly connect with, the nervous system in the physical plane. Within this subtle body exist a central current known as the *sushumna* (axial channel). On either side of this central channel run additional channels. The *ida* is believed to carry feminine, lunar forces on the left side of the body. The *pingala* is believed to carry the masculine, solar forces on the right side of the body. The *ida* and the *pingala* intertwine in helical fashion and form *cakras* (energy centers) as they cross one-another at the *sushumna* (Plate 3). A presiding deity, a seed *mantra*, and a color are attached to each of the ascending seven *cakra*. In performance, the *bharata natyam* dancer adorns each of these *cakras* with specific eye catching jewelry (Plates 4, 4a, 5). This jewelry effectively attracts the attention of the audience and dancer to these energy centers. The practice of *kundalini* yoga seeks to “intercept the left and right current and draw the bipolar energy into the central channel which commences at the anal center where *Kundalini* is thought to lay dormant” (Feuerstein 518). Practice of *asana* (body positions), *pranayama* (breath control), *mudra* (hand gestures that direct and
seal energy), \textit{mantra} (spiritually charged syllables) and meditation are used to strengthen and balance the mind and body before attempting to awaken the powerful \textit{kundalini}. Once awakened, the \textit{kundalini} is guided up the \textit{sushumna}. Each \textit{cakra} must be purified (the vibration changed) in order for the \textit{kundalini} to pass through in its ascent toward union \textit{Siva} energy above the crown of the head. When the \textit{kundalini} pierces this last \textit{cakra}, \textit{Siva} and \textit{Sakti} energy unite in \textit{ananda} (eternal bliss of union). The head ornaments of the dancer mirror the lunar (\textit{ida}), solar (\textit{pingala}) and central (\textit{sushumna}) channels described in \textit{kundalini} yoga. A line of stones (corresponding to the \textit{sushumna}) lead to the dominant, circular, heavily stone studded \textit{rakkodhi}. The \textit{rakkodhi} is positioned on the crown \textit{cakra} where Shakti and Siva energies are said to unite. The gems and gold reflect light upward reminiscent of a halo (divine energy). In his book \textit{Tantra, the Path of Ecstasy}, Feuerstein diagrams the \textit{nadis} of the subtle body (161). I reproduced this diagram in Plate 5a. There can be no mistaking the correlation between the placement of head ornaments in \textit{bharata natyam} and the representation of channels of the subtle body. The history of the origin of \textit{bharata natyam} ornamentation would be an interesting topic for further research.

\textit{Asana} are held body positions, very geometric in nature that opens the body creating muscular tension and release. This practice strengthens and balances the physical body with correct alignment, toned and flexible muscle. Additionally, these held angles stimulate glandular function that helps to cleanse the body of toxins and promote health.

\textit{Pranayama} is a technique of breath control that is used to calm the mind, settle the nervous system, and to cleanse and balance the subtle body. An example of
**pranayama** is alternate nostril breathing. In this practice the aspirant inhales through the left nostril forcing the breath into the abdomen. The breath is sustained here for a designated length of time before being exhaled through the right nostril. This mental practice (functional breathing is limited to the lungs) directs energy through specific channels related to the subtle body.

*Mantra* focuses the mind. Repetition of *mantra* is believed to balance the energies within the subtle body and then eventually raise the vibration of the aspirant at the cellular level to coincide with the vibration of the divine force. *Mudras* function to move, channel, and hold energies of the subtle body and to receive energy of the divine.

An article from Wellspring introduces Japanese researcher, Masuru Emoto. Emoto has studied the effect of music, spoken word, and even written word on water. He photographed the structure of water molecules under varying conditions around the world. His photographs revealed balanced geometric formations in water of pure sources. Photos of polluted water were irregularly formed and darker with little light. Mr. Emoto exposed water to a variety of musical forms and to written words, and names taped to the containers. The results shown in the photos were stunning. Water molecules exposed to classical music, names of people are considered holy, and words of peace, love, and harmony, created beautiful, vibrant geometric shapes. Those that were subjected to heavy metal music, the words “hate” and “Hitler” are darker, distorted, and did not form clusters. Our bodies are made up of 70% to 90% water. Emoto’s study of photographed water molecules gives scientific credence to the claim that vibration (as in *mantra*, spoken or internalized) effects a change at the cellular level.
Section III.

**Brief History of Bharata Natyam**

The oldest dated text and without a doubt the most primary text on dance is *The Natya Shastra* of Bharata Muni (200 B.C.E.-200 C.E.). This detailed scientific text codifies nearly all aspects of dance, drama, painting and music. Dance is considered a composite of all arts; therefore all that the *Natya Shastra* enumerates is pertinent dance. In the opening passages Bharata Muni specifies that the drama is of divine origin, meant for all, and serves to spiritually uplift each according to their individual need. Bharata Muni epitomizes the multileveled approach of Hinduism.

The *Natya Shastra* codifies the use of extraneous factors (characters and environment such as season, time of day and stages of love) within drama that cultivate *rasa* (a tasting of spiritual bliss) through *natya* (story-telling). For the purpose of this study I chose to concentrate on Bharata Muni’s classification of the physical body as it pertains to *nrutta* (pure dance).

This highly codified text defines movements for the entire body. Movements of the eyes, eyebrows, and cheeks are enumerated and given purpose. The gross body is separated into major and minor limbs. Movement of these limbs is dictated with consideration of skeletal and joint range, rather than of the muscular structure. This emphasis results in a particularly angular technique that creates a statuesque quality. The body is “depersonalized to the point of geometric abstraction … *Bharata natyam* is a series of triangles in space” (Vatsyayan “Square” 57).
Hands are detailed in their own section. *Hastas* (hand gestures) are listed as single hand gestures and double hand gestures. Each gesture is identified individually with its multitude of meanings to be expressed in miming. I find it interesting that commentaries assign many of the *hastas* a specific color and deity. Color is notably a variation of wavelength; a change of color denotes a change of wavelength and suggests a manipulation of energy.

Techniques of all classical Indian arts have been broken down and classified to the smallest detail. This codification creates strict formulas that depersonalize the artist while allowing the art to be repeated with little change. The art form itself becomes the main focus. The technique becomes the vessel for the art with the artist as its medium. The technique remains without the interference of an individual’s emotion. Before any artist begins their creation, they first quite their mind with yogic concentration. This quieting of the mind allows for a divine vision to enter. The artist strives to assimilate this vision within and then to recreate, to bring forth this vision in their artwork. In this way the “work of art and also the artist and the actor thus become participants in a ritual where the work of art is the *yantra*—the device through which the *sadhaka* (artist) sees the vision of the Absolute as much as the audience to whom the work of art is presented”(Vatsyayan 9). In *bharata natyam*, this quieting of mind begins with the opening pray to Lord Siva, which is recited with movement before beginning any dance. This prayer is again repeated at the end of practice or performance. This opening prayer removes the dancer from worldly life or concerns and focuses their attention within the dance. At the end of practice, this prayer is repeated and releases the dancer back to the mundane world. I believe that the divine vision is the *bhava*
(internalization of *rasa*) that is first felt by the dancer who then brings it forth to the audience.

The *Natya Shastra* breaks down specific stances and movements of body parts. It includes 108 *karanas*, descriptions of full body positions, inferring movement with their suggested use. These 108 *karanas* imparted through written word were later visually depicted through sculptures in the Brihadeeswara temple of Tanjore (11th century C.E.), the Nataraja temple of Chidambaram (9th - 12th centuries C.E.), the Sarangapani temple at Kumbakonam (13th century C.E.), and the Arunachaleswarar temple at Tiruvannamalai (7th century C.E. onward).

*Cilappatikaram*, a poem from the Sangam Age (300 C.E. - 700 C.E.), gives insight into the years of training that the dancer underwent and of the different dance styles and musical accompaniments of the time (See Appendix A). Matavi, the heroine completed seven years of technical training and lessons in voice before her first public performance. Her teacher is said to be an expert in folk and classical styles of dance and apt at matching dance styles with appropriate song, mime, singing and beat. He is said to “never confuse the pure [nrtta] with the expressive [natya]” (Atikal Canto III, 25) and was aware of single and double handed gestures and their use for mime and for dance. Music was given great importance and the expertise of the musicians emphasized.

Today’s classical *bharata natyam* evolved from the south Indian temple and court dance known as *Sadir*. *Agamas* are religious (*Tantric*) texts written by the priestly castes that ordered religious rituals and stated that these rituals should take place in a central place of worship, the temple. They declared that the four divine services performed in these temples could bring devotees closer to liberation: *charya* (service), *kriya* (worship),
yoga (union), and gnana (wisdom). Some agamas emphasize the sacredness of reciting hymns, singing praises of gods, and dancing in front of the idols. The Sivagama stated that “dance was an important limb of temple worship” (Sadasivan 29) and also mentioned that the 108 karanas prescribed by Bharata Muni should be performed. Ajitagama includes dance and music in the sixteen ceremonious rites (Sadasivan 29) while other agamas stipulate that nrtta (pure dance) be performed at a particular time, accompanied by particular modes of music, in all directions. These Tantric texts approved of and encouraged dance within the temples. Sadir was initially a form of worship danced for the lord by initiated temple servants known as devadasi.

Devadasi were ritually married to the temple icon (believed to be infused with the spirit of the deity) and were considered to have direct contact with the divine. Hindu marriage ritually unites the souls of the bride and groom. In this instance, the devadasi was considered to merge with the god’s energy that in turn equated her with Shakti (energy of the goddess) (Leslie 136). Upon initiation, the guru whispered a sacred mantra into the bride’s ear (Marglin 68).

Temple worship became popular. Devotees traveled to and temples dedicated their favorite gods. As the practice of pilgrimage evolved, temples became social and cultural centers for villages and small towns. The dance expanded beyond ritual worship of the deity and into a performance arena. The dancers entertained and enlightened the festival audience by enumerating the exploits of the gods and retelling Hindu myths and the great Indian epics. “Choreography of temple-dancing became the sophisticated and stylized renderings of religious themes apparent in its later form (bharata natyam)” (Thapar 358). This storytelling aspect of the dance (natya) can be shown to cultivate and
enhance bhakti (spiritual devotion toward God). Devadasis were given great social respect and support within this temple structure. By the end of the fifteenth century, the devadasi began performing outside of the temple precinct and mixed freely with the populace to secure wealthy patrons support that often included intimate relations.

South India has a history of warring kingdoms and the intrusion of Muslim invasion resulting in an unstable social and economic environment. The Tanjore district was the exception. This, small, compact, kingdom had neither the military nor the finances for expansion. Within this kingdom a continuous Hindu rule was maintained from 1565-1856 C.E. Without warring distractions, Tanjore became a cultural mecha and attracted some of the great artists and thinkers of the time. Sadir flourished.

King Sahaji (1684-1711) wrote nearly 500 padams (poems) in Telegu that were used in performance. King Tulaja (1728-36) authored Sangitasaramrita, a landmark text that dealt with sixteen groups of adavus (basic dance steps) with sollukattus (mnemonic drum syllables recited to while practicing adavus). This text is remarkably similar to today's bharata natyam (Kothari 31).

The sixteenth century to the nineteenth century was a period of cultural and intellectual growth accompanied with intense contemplation and restructuring of dance and music. Philosophical debates were continuous throughout Indian history. It remains highly plausible that Tantric philosophy and practices would permeate into the arts.

Tanjour was the home of four brothers, all disciples of Muthuswami Dikshitar (composer and one of the three fathers of Carnatic music) known as the Tanjore Quartet. The brothers, Cinnaiya (born ca.1802), Ponnaiya (born ca.1804), Sivanatam (born ca. 1808), and Vativelu (born ca. 1810) coordinated their diverse talents to organize and
systematize the art of dance. They created a method of learning which distinguished pure technical nṛtta dance (ritualistic origin) from nātya (dance of emotion and story telling) (bhakti origin). They organized a progressive series of lessons that contained all the basic movements of pure dance into ādavu chapters. Each ādavu (basic unit of motion) was taught in a systematic order, later combined with others to produce choreographed sequences based upon the rhythmic contour of a musical composition. The Quartet choreographed several compositions strictly for use in temple ritual. They also formulated the margam (literally path), setting the sequence of different types of dance items for a dance program creating a “balanced concert repertoire that combined the choicest dance-compositions into a harmonious concert program” (Kersenboon 44).

T. Balasaraswati (1918-1984), a famous devadasi and teacher of bharata natyam, recognized the genius of the sequence that the brothers established for dance items in a traditional dance program:

I believe that the traditional order of the bharata natyam recital is the correct sequence for revealing the spiritual through the corporeal. In the beginning, allarippu, which is based on rhythm alone, brings out the special charm of pure dance. The movements of allarippu relax the dancer’s body and thereby her/his mind, loosens and coordinates the limbs, and prepares the dancer for the rest of the recital. Allarippu is most valuable in freeing the dancer from distraction and focusing the mind. The joy of pure rhythm in allaripu is followed by jatisvaram where there is the added joy of melody. Melody, without words or syllables here, has
a special power to unite us with our being. In jatisvaram, melody and
movement come together.

The bharata natyam recital is structured like a Great Temple: we enter
through the outer hall of the allaripu, cross the half-way hall of the
jatisvaram, then the great hall of shabdam and then enter the holy precinct
of the deity in the varnam. This is the space, which gives the dancer
expressive scope to revel in the music, rhythm and moods of the dance.
The varnam is the continuum, which gives ever-expanding room to the
dancer to delight in self-fulfillment, by providing the fullest scope to
his/her creativity as well as to the tradition of the art.

After the varnam, padams (and other devotional songs such as
devarunamas) now follow. In dancing to padams, one experiences the
containment, cool and quiet of entering the sanctum from its external
precinct. The expanse and brilliance of the outer corridors disappears in
the dark inner sanctum; and the rhythmic virtuosities of the varnam yield
to the soul-stirring music and abhinaya of the padam. Dancing to the
padam is akin to the juncture when the cascading lights of worship are
withdrawn and the drumbeats die down to the simple and solemn chanting
of sacred verses in the closeness of god. Then, the tillana breaks into
movement like the final burning of camphor accompanied by a measure of
din and bustle. In conclusion, the devotee takes to his heart the god he has
so far glorified outside; and the dancer completes the traditional order by
dancing to a simple devotional verse. (qtd. in Raman 1)
In this analysis of the structure of the margam, Balasaraswati clearly equates completion of a traditional dance program with the physical journey through a Hindu temple and the spiritual journey of the dancer and the audience. Upon visiting a temple, one enters through a main gate and walks clockwise visiting deities along the way before spiraling into the inner sanctum which houses the main deity. The temple structure is designed with specific geometric patterns of squares, circles, and triangles forming a yantra as prescribed by Agamic/Tantric texts.

The practice of kundalini yoga, a mode of Tantric practice, has likewise been equated with visiting a temple (Kersenboom 97). The yoga practitioner aspires to awaken kundalini, the dormant spiritual energy residing at the base of the spine, and channel this energy up the central pathway visiting the deities that preside over each ascending cakra (energy center). In visiting each deity, the kundalini must cleanse the cakra (changing its vibration to remove energy blocks) before continuing its ascent. The ultimate goal in this yoga is to reach the cleansing of the final cakra (inner sanctum of the temple housing the main deity). This final cleansing results in the realization of and union with the divine power. The journey to the deities corresponds to the aspirant’s, the devotee’s, and the dancer’s personal journey toward their inner being, in union with their divine being. Balasaraswati suggests that the structure of the margam allows for a cleansing of the dancer’s cakras, and an ascent of spiritual power toward union, yoga.

Balasaraswati mentions the power of sound. She states that melody without words and without intellectual accompaniment “has a special power to unite us with our being.” She writes “dancing the padam is akin to the juncture when the cascading lights of worship are withdrawn and the drumbeats die down to the simple and solemn chanting
of sacred verses in the closeness of god.” Here an involution, a journey inward toward union with Brahman is demonstrated. This passage emulates the process of *yantric* meditation. The dancer leads the audience, as she moves through the structured program, to taste the sacred union.

The Tanjore district flourished in cultural debate while isolating itself from political strife. The larger surrounding areas that were ruled by Vijayanagara and Nayak Emperors began to flounder. As their status shrunk, resources dwindled and patronage of the temples was cut. Courts collected taxes from land grants that had been given to the temples. The temples were inclined to keep the *devadasi* as a source of income in order to pay state tax. The *devadasi* was forced to look outside the temple toward wealthy landowners for financial support. As a result the *devadasi* system was made into a profession.

Kersenboom points out that the *nityasumangali* (the ever-auspicious woman) had previously served an important role by effectively dealing with the dangerous divine. This was to remove the evil eye, to feed, bathe, and decorate the divine (49). As a servant, she had been given land, food, and housing. Through artistic specialization of the dance, the *devadasi* enhanced the mood of *bhakti* and entertained by retelling the stories of the gods and the kings. While this artistic specialization brought the *devadasis’* prestige within society, it diminished their role as a *nityasumangali*.

Later, lack of patronage by these rulers in addition to the taxation was one cause for the downfall of the *devadasi* system. To survive in this new environment, the devadasi were forced to turn to the public for economic support. Some *devadasi* left the temple to dance in the streets and many dancers turned to prostitution as a means to
support themselves. For some previously accepted long-term monogamous relations of other devadasi began to be misinterpreted. Though the structure of the dance had been solidified during the Tanjore rule and themes of the dance had undergone philosophical, religious, and cultural debate, the devadasi, the practitioners of the dance, came under suspicion of immorality.

“The temples under the later Vijayanagara rulers became centers of prostitution and debauchery” (Sadasivan 148). Loss of royal patronage and general moral decay within society at this time contributed to the decline of the devadasi system from a sacred institution to that of a profane institution grasping for survival even before the British colonization. Colonization by the British introduced western education. Christianized morality began to infiltrate the Indian consciousness and initiated a change in moral code that furthered the demise of the devadasi. As a result the public opinion of the devadasi system degenerated from its original spiritual calling.

The devadasi system was subject not only to political and social changes but also to human frailties. From my own personal experience, I believe that this dance form remains a powerful spiritual vessel. The devadasis, their teachers, and musicians maintained the structure of this dance form and it is my belief that the centuries of practicing the unnatural stances, mudras, choreography, and focused devotion toward a higher power has served to hone the practice of channeling divine energy through the systematized structure of the dance.

In the early nineteen hundreds, as Indians searched for an identity apart from their British rulers, they looked toward their ancient arts. Bharata natyam was promoted as an ambassador for Indian culture, spirituality and antiquity. ‘Revivalists’ recognized
the beauty and the power of Sadir and strove to separate it from the stigma of immorality associated to the devadasi. Sadir was renamed bharata natyam and dancers from upper castes began to study and perform publicly. Changes in the dance style, presentation, and content were made in order to ‘purify’ the dance form and raise it to its original place of sacredness.

In 1926 a young lawyer from Madras, E. Krishna Iyer brought the dance to the public stage outside the temple by performing dressed in female attire. In 1927, he organized the first All Indian Music Conference in Madras. This conference initiated the establishment of the Music Academy in 1928. From its inception the Music Academy has served as a performance venue that supports and propagates classical music and dance. On this stage Rukmini Devi Arundale first witnessed bharata natyam. The performers were the devadasi sisters M.D. Gauri and P. K. Jivaratnam, disciples of Pandanallur Guru Meenakshisundaram Pillai. Rukmini Devi was immediately overwhelmed by the beauty of the dance and “resolved to revive it” (Gaston 85).

Rukmini, a Brahmin from a respectable family, was able to persuade the well-known nattuvanar (dance teacher) Meenakshisundaram Pillai to take her on as his student. After the achievement of the basic steps, it became clear to Rukmini that “there was much that was undesirable, not only in the actual movements, [but also in the themes of colloquial love]. It was not difficult for me to convince my teacher that I would not be able to learn such an aspect, and so my dance took another turn and I worked entirely for the spiritualization of the art” (qtd. in Gaston 277).

Rukmini began to clarify lines and ‘dignify’ the content of the dance form by removing purely secular songs from the repertoire. S. Sarada recalls “Rukmini Devi was
particular that there should be no unnecessary movements of the foot or any limb of the
body…this resulted in the Kalakshetra style of dance concurring with the descriptions
contained in the ancient treatises of dance” (qtd. in Gaston 202). Rukmini Devi strove to
return bharata natyam to its spiritual beginnings by removing the secular deviations that
had infiltrated through the centuries.

Chandralekhar was an innovative dancer traditionally trained in bharata natyam. She had a successful bharata natyam career but became frustrated with the
commercialization of the dance and the audience’s preoccupation to the surface beauty of
the dancer. Chandra was highly philosophical and began to explore yoga and Kalahari
(traditional martial arts of Kerala). She had a “profound understanding of ‘lines’ of
movement. … [and equated] horizontal, vertical and diagonal lines with harmony,
confrontation and conflict respectively” (Bharucha 60). She marveled that simply
changing the location of its exit and entrance on stage could alter the strength of a dance
sequence. Bharucha believes that Chandra’s observances were “linked, perhaps, not to
just to the right and left functions of the brain but to solar and lunar energies as well” (60-
1). She incorporated bharata natyam, yoga and Kalahari into dance pieces but is quick to
note that her dance items are not fusion pieces. She presents each tradition on the same
stage but without intermingling their techniques. After attending one of Chandra’s
performances, Rukmini Devi commented that the program was conceived and executed
“with tremendous devotion and great originality … There’s a saying which many
occultist have said that ‘God geometrise’s’. That’s a phrase I’ve been accustomed to.
And I think she [Chandra] too has ‘geometrised’ because there is occult meaning in dance
too…” (qtd. in Bharucha 66).
Balasaraswati believed Rukmini Devi’s innovations resulted in a sterilization or Puritanism of the dance (Gaston 94). Rukmini Devi, a highly cultured woman herself, was immersed in the theosophical society and influenced by its great spiritual leaders of the time, Annie Bessant, C. W. Leadbeater, and George Arundale. I believe that it was this environment and her innate sensitivity to the atmosphere and abilities of the modern, western educated audience that encouraged her to make changes in the form that would best uplift the audience. I believe that these changes included a practical application of ‘God geometrisis’ to apprehend the “occult meaning in dance” when she insisted on clarity of line in the dance and correct pause.
Section IV.

**Indian Aesthetics and Conception of Beauty**

For centuries India has actively contemplated the meaning and purpose of life. The Upanishads (800 B.C.E) expounded a doctrine of unity and interdependence of all life. The deep realization of this unity is “the highest good, bliss, salvation, freedom, the final purpose of life” (Coomaraswamy “Dance”)7. The great epics represent an ideal society in which heroes practically apply this philosophy (6). The Brahmans believed the only practical activity must be directed toward this realization of unity, of one source, one essence, one goal, a unity between the material and the spiritual life (3, 7). Indian philosophy/religion is an integral part of life, not an isolated subject but an ideal that subtly permeates the Indian subconscious and influences all aspects of Indian society.

Ananda Coomaraswamy exquisitely states in the opening page of his book *The Dance of Siva* that the “heart and essence of the Indian experience is to be found in a constant intuition of the unity of all life, and the instinctive and ineradicable conviction that the recognition of this unity is the highest good and the uttermost freedom.” “All that India can offer to the world precedes from her philosophy … the essential basis of sociology and education. This search for union with the Ultimate as the “fundamental meaning and purpose of life is deliberately grasped in India”(1). India’s theory of beauty and aesthetic experience is intimately woven with this ideal.

Beauty is a very elusive term subject to personal taste and remains on the worldly plane. *Rasa*, (flavor or taste of union with the divine) is equally elusive to definition and description until it has been experienced bridging the worldly and spiritual plane. *Rasa* is
the feeling of bliss when forgetting oneself while identifying completely with the subject matter, whether in a drama, painting, musical composition, or dance. The great Indian philosopher and trantric adept Abhinava Gupta (933-1015 C.E.) equated aesthetic experience with mystical experience and aesthetic rapture with the mystical experience of bliss known as ananda (Kersenboom XVI). This is the experience that all Indian art strives to bring forth, to build emotions within the artist and the audience which creates an aesthetic experience for inner contemplation. “Bliss is the soul of the beautiful” (Sastri 39). The Taittiriya Upanishad states that the “prismatic splendor of the joy of the artist is a high level of bliss: higher that mere sense delights, far below the plane of the white light of spiritual bliss”(Sastri 39). This delight in the dancer and the audience has been described as rasa, the tasting of bliss.

As noted previously, the Natya Shastra codified with great care all details of drama, it is not surprising then that the theory of aesthetics and rasa were also systematized. India’s theory of rasa accepts the interplay of emotions on the mind and has organized the factors, which contribute to the manifestation of emotion, and those factors that serve to intensify such emotions to create the complete identification with the subject matter. The artist and the spectator join with that subject and the self is forgotten.

Gowri Ramnarayan writes that aesthetic experience brings us to an inward contemplation where union is savored. Emotions evoked by art are non-ordinary. Indicators of the content of the artwork and the nature of the reader’s response go beyond practical interests and the passion-bound ego. Bharata lists the ingredients whose combination results in the manifestation of rasa. External factors are vibhavs and anubhavas. Internal factors are sthayibhavas and vyabhicaribhavas. Sattvikabhavas
bridge the two as they rise from the heart and become involuntary external manifestations.

_Vibhavas_ are easily identified as the determinants, _alambana_ (the characters) and _uddipana_ (the excitant situations and actions) that give rise to the mood. _Anubhavas_ are external manifestations of feelings such as the glance and the smile. Eight or nine _sthayibhavas_ (corresponding to eight or nine _rasa_) are the basic elemental emotive complexes inherent in every human psyche as permanent and dominant instincts. _Vyabhicaribhavas_ are the transitory feelings that come and go in quick succession arising from some elemental emotion (acquired through experience in life, foster _sthayibhavas_ but are dependant upon them). They manifest its richness and depth. _Rasa_ is the experience of the respondent alone and is always joyful whereas the emotions of real life may produce joy or sorrow (Ramnarayan 1, 2).

“The formal beauty [the vehicle for _rasa_] will be sensed in vitality and unity, design and rhythm” (Coomaraswamy “Transformation” 48) while maintaining complete identification with the subject matter independent of theme.
Section V.

**Formal Structure of Bharata Natyam**

This section of the paper will concentrate on the physical structure of the dance as I have learned from the students of Rukmini Devi Arundale at her internationally renowned institute, Kalakshetra College of Fine Arts, Madras, where I lived and studied for four years. At Kalakshetra, great attention was paid to symmetry of the body, use of eyes, and clarity of lines, movement, pauses, and precision of hand gestures. We were taught in a very systematic way, spending a full year and a half on the basic steps alone before learning our first dance. Theory classes concentrated on learning *shloakas* (Sanskrit prayers) of the *Abhinaya Darpana*, which went into great detail about the classification of body parts and movements as prescribed in Bharata’s *Natya Shastra*. We were taught special eye exercises and practiced hand gestures. Memorized *shloakas* paid homage to Lord Siva and various gods and goddesses, and the mythological origin of the dance was learned. A disjointed history of dance was taught in the final year with just the briefest note on the *devadasi* who had simply ‘fallen into ill repute’. This lack of emphasis given to the repositories and keepers of this art serves to underline the social stigma attached to the *devadasi* that continues even today. Studies at Kalakshetra were focused on training the body, the vehicle.

The following will outline some of the poses and steps that form the basic vocabulary of *bharata natyam*. Through line drawings I have emphasized the geometrics formed in these most unnatural body positions (Orange = plumb lines, Purple = geometrics). I used the navel as the center of the body and followed plumb lines from
vertical and horizontal signifiers brought to my attention while researching the sculpture
(Plates 7a, 7b, 8a, 8b, 9a, 9b).

**Basic Postures**

*SAMAPADAM* (Plate 6, 7)

The stance taken during the recitation of the opening prayer before initial
movement in *bharata natyam* is called *samapadam*. In class or practice, this is the
‘relaxed’ ‘at ease’ position that the dancer returns to. The feet are parallel just a few
fingers width apart, the body stands vertical leaning forward just a bit, and the arms are
bent with palms flat, fingers stretched while remaining together (*pataka hasta*) either in
*angali hasta* (prayer position) (Plate 6) in front of the chest while reciting prayers or
positioned at the back of the waist with the elbows bent and reaching to the sides (Plate
7). *Samapadam* is a pose full of dynamic energy and balance. The body is in perfect
symmetry and the focus of the dancer and of the audience is brought inward, centered and
quieted. The vertical is emphasized; an important symbol in speculative thought that the
vertical body serves as the *axis mundi*, the polar tension that serves to connect the
heavens and earth. As the focus is turned inward closer to the spine, an incredibly strong
energetic pole is formed.

*ARIMUNDHI* (Plate 8)

From this ‘relaxed’ *samapadam*, the hips open, legs and feet rotate outwards
forming a straight line as the knees bend into a deep half sitting (demi plie). The spine
should stay straight, knees over toes; arms remain bent with *pataka hasta* (Plate 12) on
the hips with the palms facing to the back. Energy is never static in any part of the body. The dancer continuously strives to deepen arimundhi (half seated position). This is the ‘pose’ from which nearly all movement in the dance originates and returns to. Elbows form angles to the sides following that of the knees.

**MULAMUNDHI (Plate 9)**

Mulimundhi (full sitting) is the extension of the arimundi. The dynamics and openings remain the same as the heels are forced to lift. This position resembles a grande plie with the exception that this position is held and that the body actually sits on the heels. This position is very similar to Mulabandhasana, a yogic posture that is used to initiate kundalini awakening (Harper 8).

**NATYARAMBHAI (Plate 14)**

Natyarambhai is one of the basic arm positions and is quite bird like. The arms are stretched to the sides, wrists are at shoulder level, and hands are in pataka hasta with the palm and fingers stretched up. In this position the shoulders remain relaxed and the elbows rotate back and up. This bending of elbows and rotation of the shoulder joint maintains the energy within and around the body creating a perimeter rather than endless space.

**Adavus**

Adavus are the basic dance steps and are learned in a systematic way. The adavus are taught without music, to the beating of a stick on a block of wood with specific Sanskrit mnemonic syllables (solukatu, sound of the drum) prescribed for each set of
steps. The beating of the stick, the recitation of *solukatu*, and the stamping of feet surround the dancer with unmistakable vibration. These *solukatu* also serve as an invaluable tool for learning choreography. The dancer hears the *solukatu* while learning the steps. Next the dancer internalizes these syllables through mentally repetition in order to maintain correct meter and pause. Combined steps are learned and practiced using these syllables before being put to music or poetry. In *Yoga and the Hindu Tradition*, Varenne states, “Every combination of Sanskrit words is capable of constituting a *mantra* [and] ... many *mantras* have no appreciable meaning at all ... [many] consist merely of one syllable” (105).

Eyes are an important feature of the dance. In the *natya* portion of *bharata natyam*, the eyes are used to convey meaning and emotion. During the *nrtta* portion of the dance, they are specifically focused straight forward toward the audience or are directed toward the *hastas*. Special exercises strengthen the muscles around the eyes and condition them to remain wide open and unblinking. The eyes are used to direct the focus of the dancer and of the audience to the *hastas*. A *shloakas* learned in theory class aptly supports the use of the eyes to direct the attention or mind to the *hastas*. The *Natyakramaha* of Nandikesvara’s *Abhinayadarpanam* states:

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{Yatau Hasta Statau Drishti} \\
&\text{Yatau Drishti Statau Manaha} \\
&\text{Yatau Manaha Statau Bhavaum} \\
&\text{Yatau Bhavaum Statau Rasaha}
\end{align*}
\]
Translates as:

Where the hand goes, there the eyes should follow.
Where the eyes are, the mind should follow.
Where the mind is, there the expression should be brought out.
Where the expression is there the *rasa* will be experienced.

The last two lines of the *shloakas* further support the importance of the hand-eye connection suggesting that this one pointed concentration will bring about expression and stimulate the experience of *rasa*. This focus consolidates the attention of the audience to the movement of the dancer within the boundary created this hand-eye connection. Blinking weakens this tool of focus.

Class begins by centering the dancer with a pray to Siva and salutations to Bhumi (mother earth). All practice in the class begins in *samapadam*. Dancers are taught to think of someone or something that they love deeply while in *adavu* practice. This concentration guides the awareness away from the physical pain and fatigue experienced while practicing this strenuous art form while infusing emotions of love and joy into the dance. Four introductory counts are given during which the body moves into *arimundhi* and it is from this position that the actual step is initiated. All *adavus* are practiced in three *kalas* (speeds) and the dancer returns to *samapadam* at the completion of the *adavus* or dance sequence. *Samapadam* is the stance of repose. There is never any break of posture or focus.
TAT ADAVU

*Tat adavu* (tat is to strike) is the first step that is learned and must be practiced for many weeks before moving on. The *tat adavu* begins from *arimundhi*, tension is felt in the opening of the legs and hips as the dancer tries to sit ever deeper in the plie. Eyes remain in *samam* (straight forward with pleasant expression). The focus in the body is to remain perfectly symmetrical (without rocking from side to side) while lifting one foot at a time, hinged at the knee so as not to lift from the thigh as the relaxed foot hits the buttocks and releases to slap the floor. This striking of the feet are practiced in eights different rhythms, each in three speeds: first, second (twice that of the first) and third (twice that of second), then second and first. Practice of *tat adavu* strives to integrate correct basic position within the dancer. Correct position establishes lowered center of gravity, strong vertical pole, symmetry and balance. After many years of practice, when an ideal position can be maintained, the tension between the hips, between the knees, and the concentrated lowering of the body creates a suspension effect which releases the legs to move freely, and energy seems to be continually revitalized.

NAT ADAVU (Plate 15)

*Nat* (stretched) *adavu* is the second series of steps to be learned and introduces movement of the eyes, arms and *hastas*. With each new *adavu* learned, the dancer engages the eyes, arms, and *hasta* with precision. In the first and most basic step in this series, as the body moves from *samapadam* to *arimundhi*, the arms are stretched to a *natyarambhai* position with *tripataka hasta* (Plate 13). The footwork consists of hitting the backside with the foot in *arimundhi* and then extending or straightening the leg to the
side in line with the knee. The foot is energetically flexed causing the back of the heel to touch the floor as the toes point to the sky and the soul of the foot is fully exposed. From here, the knee folds as the foot again kicks the backside before slapping the floor as in the 
\textit{tat adavu}. As the leg is extended and the flexed heel touches the ground, the corresponding wrist turns to expose the full palm with tips of the fingers extending to the side. The head turns slightly as the eyes focus on the \textit{hasta}. As the leg returns to \textit{arimundhi}, the wrist rotates back to original position, and glance returns to the center. This series of steps builds to include the leg stretched directly in front and to have the body twisting around the center axis. The balance of \textit{arimundhi} remains throughout.

\textit{MULIMANDHI ADA VU}

These \textit{adavus} are devoted to basic steps that maintain or move through the lowest seated position on the heels. The dancer moves beneath the full sitting with a series of hops while trying to maintain heel-bottom contact. Steps alternate with lowering one knee at a time, popping up to standing on one foot (Plate 16, resembles the ‘tree’ \textit{asana} in \textit{hatha yoga}) or to sliding back to a seated on the floor position from which a turn is used to bring the dancer to her feet.

\textit{CIRCULAR ADA VU}

This \textit{adavu} consists of the body turning around a central axis. This turn can be made on a flexed heel, on the ball of a foot or can be made with a jump. The vertical axis is emphasized with either an up stretched arm or an arm folded with hand chest level at the centerline and the elbow stretched to the side. The circular movement is etched in
space by the alternate hand stretching either in the front or to the side in the horizontal plane and coming back to the center chest level at the completion of the rotation.

**TA TAI TAI TAT ADAVU**

This *adavu* exemplifies at the simultaneous engagement of *tandava* (vigorous, masculine movement) and *lasya* (graceful, feminine movement) in one body. The dancer covers space to the right, returns center, then travels to the left and returning center while maintaining strong sitting and slapping *tandava* movements of the lower body. Meanwhile the upper body is swept straight front, to the right, twist around the center axis to the back, and center. This graceful *lasya* movement is then repeated to the left. This display of feminine and masculine energies concurrent in one body is also represented in *kundalini* yoga.

I have used Plates 7, 8, and 9 to superimpose the geometrics created within the body while maintaining *samapadam* (the body in “repose”), *arimundhi* (from where nearly all adavus initiate), and *mulimundhi* (from where most adavus in the lowest plane initiate). The results are characterized by numerous interwoven triangles and symmetry (Plates 7b, 8b, 9b) resembling *tantric yantras* (Plates 1, 2, 11). Lawlor has similarly superimposed lines over a bharata natyam dancer (reproduced as Plate 10). He uses his lines to emphasize “geometric angular relationships from the axis of the body’s center of gravity just below the navel”(95). Lawlor further states that the positions of *bharata natyam* define principle angles … “are often attributed to various deities and are meant to convey their characteristic powers”(95). Lawlor and Chandralekhar recognize the power
of angles and lines. Constant practice is necessary in order to maintain the alignment of the body and therefore create effective and affective geometrics and tensions.

Once the basic adavu chapters are learnt, they are combined into small sequences known as corvais. Longer sequences of adavus are choreographed into dance items.

**Dance Items**

*Allaripu* is the first item learned. An nrtta (pure dance) item danced to sollukattu (rhythmic drum syllables) introduces basic rhythms and movements that are later expanded upon. The Tamil word *Allaripu* means a flowering or opening up. This dance piece serves to awaken the body of the dancer and the attention of the audience. It is also the dancer’s dedication of their dance to the divine. The *Jatisvaram* follows the *Allaripu.*

The *Jatisvaram* is a second nrtta item. This item introduces more complicated rhythms and steps and is danced to sing swaras (musical notes). The dance movements alternate with complete synchronization to the music and varying from strict structure of the music. Single or multiple ragas (melodies of specific ascending and descending scales structured to elicit specific moods, organized to sing at certain times of the day) can be used in this song.

*Shabdam* follows the *Jatisvaram.* This item introduces the dancer to elementary natya (story-telling). Short lines of poetry alternate with small nrtta sequences. The item is performed in slow tempo.

The showpiece of the margam is the varnam. This is an intensely difficult item that alternates between extremely complex nrtta performed in varying speeds with highly evolved natya. Lines of the song are repeated and the dancer must summon all
knowledge and emotion to present the same line in different ways. This item is very
demanding and has traditionally lasted up to two hours.

The highly strenuous and complex varnam is followed in traditional sequence by
any one or combination of natya items such as the Ashtapadi, Padam, Javali, or
Kirtanam. These items are performed in slower tempo to sung poetry. This portion of
the margam acts as a break from physicality of the previous dance while emphasizing the
emotional aspect.

The last item of the traditional margam is the Tillana. The Tillana is an nrtta
piece of intricate rhythm and body positioning. It is the joyful accumulation of the
program, highly energetic and invigorating for the dancer and the audience after a period
of emotional contemplation. This last item is may be followed by a shloakas and a
dedication to the divine.

It is clear that the nrtta portion of the dance is given great significance within the
dance style and presentation. The only purpose that I have been taught for these items is
to ornament the Carnatic music and to express joy but I believe that the purpose behind
this aspect of the dance is far greater.
Examples of Yantras

Plate 1 Sri Yantra
Copper Plate
<http://alumni.cse.ucsc.edu/~mikel/sriyantra/sri3.html>

Plate 2 Swayamvara Yantra
Hand Painted
<http://www.exoticindiaart.com/artimages/da41.jpg>
Plate 3 Cakras of kundalini yoga illustrating the helical accent of the ida, pingala, around the sushumna channels.
<www3.sympatico.ca/antoine.carre/-9k>
Bharata Natyam Ornaments Aligned with Cakras

Plate 4 Fully Adorned Dancer

Bindi (sixth cakra)
Chocker (fifth cakra)
Long Necklace (fourth cakra)
Belt (third cakra)

Rakkodi: The round, stone studded jewel fastened on the crown (seventh cakra).

Kunjalam: The jeweled tassel attached to the end of the long plait (first and second cakras).

Plate 4a Hair ornaments back view.
<http://www.ranidevi.com/aharyam.htm>
Plate 5  Head jewelry showing placement of the Sun (Ida) and the Moon (Pingala) separated by a straight line of stones (Sushumna).  

Plate 5a  “Representation of the subtle channels (nadi) through which the life force circulates” (Feuerstein, *Tantra* 161).
Basic Bharata Natyam Postures

Plate 6 Samapadam stance holding angali hasta
Plate 7  Samapadam
Plate 7a  Samapadam with superimposed geometrics.
Plate 7b Geometrics formed by *samapadam* suggesting *yantric* formation.
Plate 8 Arimundhi
Plate 8a *Arimundhi* with superimposed geometrics.
Plate 8b Geometrics formed over *arimundhi*
suggesting *yantric* formation.
Plate 9 Mulimundhi
Plate 9a *Mulimundhi* with superimposed geometrics.
Plate 9b Geometrics formed over *mulimundhi* suggesting yantric formation.
Plate 10  “The positions of Hindu classical dance (Bharata Natyam) describe geometric angular relationships from the axis of the body’s center of gravity just below the navel. These positions, while defining principle angles are also often attributed to various deities and are meant to convey their characteristic powers” (Lawlor 95).
Plate 11 “Yogini Yantra, for tantric shrines devoted to Sakti worship, after the *Silpa-Prakasa*” (Khanna 145)
Plate 14 Natyarambhai
Plate 15 Nat Adavu

Plate 16 A moment of Mulimundhi Adavu resembling tree pose in yoga
Plate 16
NS. *Sarpasirsa*  
AD. *Sarpasirsa*  
Color: Yellow  
Deity: Siva

Plate 17
NS. *Mrgasirsa*  
AD. *Mrgasirsa*  
Color: White  
Deity: Mahasvara Siva

Plate 18
NS. *Simhamukha*  
AD. *Simhamukha*  
Color: Yellow  
Deity: Siva
Plate 19
NS. Kangula  NS. IX. 88-9, p.140
AD. Kangula  AD. 146-6, p.53
Color: Golden
Deity: Padma

Plate 20
NS. Alapadmaka  NS. IX. 90-1, p.140
AD. Alapadma  AD. 146-9, p.53
Color: Dusty
Deity: Sun

Plate 21
NS. Catura  NS. IX. 92-9, p.140-1
AD. Catura  AD. 149-52, p.53
Color: Dusty
Deity: Sun
Plate 22
NS. Bhramara   NS. IX. 100-2, p.141
AD. Bhramara   AD. 152-4, p.53
Color: Cloudy Black
Deity: Garuda

Plate 23
NS. Hamsaya   NS. IX. 103-4, p.141
AD. Hamsasya   AD. 154-7, p.53-4
Color: White
Deity: Brahma

Plate 24
NS. Hamsapaksa   NS. IX. 105-8, p.141
AD. Hamsapaksa   AD. 157-9, p.54
Color: Blue
Deity: Kamadeva
Plate 25
NS. Sandamsa  NS. IX. 109-115, p.141-2
AD. Sandamsa  AD. 159-61, p.54
(describes movement)
Color: White
Deity: Valmiki

Plate 26
NS. Mukula  NS. IX. 116-8, p.142
AD. Mukula  AD. 161-3, p.54
Color: White
Deity: Candra

Plate 27
NS. Tamracuda  NS. IX. 123-5, p.142-3
AD. Tamracuda  AD. 163-4, p.54
Color: Red
Deity: Incarnation as Tortoise
Plate 28
NS.
AD. *Trisula* AD. 165, p.54
Samuta Hastas

Double Hand Gestures

Plate 29
NS. Anjali  NS. IX. 127-8, p.143
AD. Anjali  AD. 176-7, p.56

Plate 30
NS. Kapota  NS. IX.129-31, p.143
AD. Kapota  AD. 177-8, p.56

Plate 31
NS. Svastika  NS. IX.134-5, p.144
AD. Svastika  AD. 180-1, p.56
Plate 35
NS. AD. Sivalinga AD. 186, p.57

Plate 36
NS. Kataka NS. IX. 136, p.144
Vardhamanaka
AD. Katakavardhana AD. 187, p57

Plate 37
NS. AD. Sakta AD. 189-90, p.57
Plate 41
NS.
AD. *Pasa* AD. 194, p.57

Plate 42
NS.
AD. *Kilaka* AD. 195, p.58

Plate 43
NS.
AD. *Matsya* AD. 196-7, p.58
Plate 44
NS.
AD. Kurma  AD. 197-8, p.58

Plate 45
NS.
AD. Varaha  AD. 198-9, p.58

Plate 46
NS.
AD. Garuda  AD. 200, p.58
Section VI.

Testimonials

As a dancer and observer of *bharata natyam* for over twenty years, I have experienced powerful movements of energy and moments of unearthly bliss in connection with this ancient dance form. Having studied ballet from the age of five, modern dance, and jazz, I was drawn to and began my study of *bharata natyam* my freshman year at Skidmore College. I had no knowledge of the south Indian culture or of Hinduism. I felt the classical south Indian music (Carnatic) to be very powerful and the dance form extremely challenging. *Bharata natyam* is the most difficult dance form that I have studied, not due to the cultural mysteries that gives intrigue, but due to the highly angular and unnatural positions and movements. The limbs are trained to retain and move through clearly defined angles while forcing the center of gravity earthbound.

After completing my undergraduate work at Skidmore I traveled to India to study this art form in its culture of origin. I studied with Padmasri Adyar K. Lakshman, one of the first students of Kalakshetra College of Fine Arts, Chennai world renowned for the teaching and preservation of classical south Indian arts. I was privileged to have daily private class with Sir and later joined a group class. Toward the end of my six-month stay, I had a most remarkable experience. I had the opportunity to dance with other students at the Golden Temple of Chidambaram in Tamil Nadu, the home of the *Nataraja* (*Śiva* as the Lord of the Dance). We danced in casual clothes to the voices of our teachers in the inner compound facing the *Nataraja* and at the apex of *Lord Vishnu*. This was not a performance that we had prepared for but an offering of work in
progress...there were no expectations of what was to follow. As the dance began, my body felt as if it had been filled (full vessel) with an incredible energy. I became a witness to the expansion of energy and bliss as my body continued to dance the Allaripu, a dance of nṛtta. As the dance and song ended, I felt this expansion of energy slowly centralize near my spine and suddenly drop and bounce back up to explode effervescing out through my pores, overwhelming bliss and uncontrollable tears swelled lasting some time.

This experience has had a profound effect on my life. The following year I joined Kalakshetra with the certainty that this was my ‘calling’. These next four years of study at Kalakshetra tempered my body, mind and spirit. Though Kalakshetra translates as “holy ground of the arts”, spiritualism was rarely mentioned. We met each morning under the banyan tree to recite morning prayers...Hindu, Christian, Muslim, all religions present. During practical class we were instructed to think of any one or thing that we loved deeply to infuse that mood of love and joy into our dance. The mythological origin of the dance was memorized and in my final year a disjointed history of dance was taught with out much talk of the devadasi, the repositories and keepers of these arts. I was simply told that they had fallen into ill repute. Studies at Kalakshetra were focused on training the body. The structure of the dance in physical form was emphasized and significantly important.

I had other ‘experiences’ as well in my final year when technique and stamina were coming together. During a particularly strenuous class, body in alignment, I felt an incredible energy in my womb area, vibrations that intensified into non-sexual irritation. This feeling continued to intensify even when I paused between repetitions of steps.
Dance ritual is known to stand for the fifth m of Tantrism (maithuna, sexual union) ritual (Marglin 95). Tantras use the practiced of maithuna to stir or ignite latent energy that could then be moved or guided while striving to detach from the sensual worldly pleasure. Dr. Marglin remarked in Wives of the God/King that the devadasi refer to the dance representing the fifth m as ‘leavings of the goddess’ referring to release of sexual fluid (232). Bharati comments on this finding by remarking that the “purpose of pancamakara practice [tantric] is certainly not conception, but the very opposite---immersion into the Brahman---essence, which is the consummation of the process of involution, not of procreation”(qut. in Marglin 232). These stirrings that I experienced were within the womb area but were not sexually inspired. This experience gave an impression that an inert energy that had been activated by the dance. I suggest that these connections further support my belief in the mirrored technique and practice of bharata natyam and tantric philosophy, and kundalini yoga.

When I dance now I do still have the experience of my body moving on its own, be it muscle memory or mystic experience. I had experienced this to a lesser degree with other forms of dance previously. My experience of energy shifts, calmness, and overflowing feelings of bliss has been unique in this dance form. In my thirty-three years of dance nothing has equaled the intensity of the first experience in Chidambaram temple.

I mentioned that I felt the power of the Carnatic music upon my first introduction to the dance form in college. I did intentionally use the word ‘power’ and believe that the particular vibrations of ragas have a way of aligning energies in the body. This belief comes again from personal experience. I attended many Carnatic music concerts in India by some of the greatest artists. On many occasions I have fallen into spontaneous
meditation. Once in deep meditation, a focused energy physically forced the movement of my body. My head was forced back by elongating my neck to such an extreme that it felt as if my skin would split… my back eventually would straighten and a force close to my spine would thrust my back forward leaving my face hovering inches above the floor while vibrations pulsed through my body.

In my field research I have contacted nearly thirty dancers, musicians, yogis, and academics to comment on my hypothesis and share their experiences. Several of these people were not available or did not feel qualified to respond to connections of Tantric and kundalini, or in other cases were not familiar with this dance form. Many did however respond with interest. What follows is a sampling of responses:

I think the points you have made regarding the power of nrtta in channeling spiritual energy are very interesting and perceptive. For me, dance has always been a spiritual experience, a joyous prayer… (a) profound, transcendental, transforming art. (Valli, acclaimed bharata natyam performer)

I found many of your observations Kundalini yoga and bharata natyam interesting. I too have had amazing spiritual experiences while dancing in Chidambaram and during several other occasions, including dance class while doing varnam! I felt as though my body was dancing but my mind and soul were outside of me—I think you captured the experience beautifully with your words! It
left me with a deep sense of peace, joy and love- it also made me cry (of course, tears of happiness). True, bharata natyam utilizes unnatural positions however; I have always felt that muscles, which indirectly allow the spirit of one’s soul to feel more whole. I do believe bharata natyam is spiritual, after all wasn’t it designed for that purpose? I also believe that what gets missed while learning/teaching is this purpose. Our world is so geared towards the end that no one enjoys the process! Dancing has become another ‘selling attribute’ and therefore, the dancer is not able to ‘dive’ into the vibrations and feel its healing power. I do feel that once the technique of bharata natyam is understood and somewhat perfected, then only can the dancer transcend into the spiritual aspect of the art and truly connect with the core. (Shurti, graduate of Kalakshetra, performer and teacher for nearly 20 years)

I never had the one great spiritual experience while dancing. Only once in a while, coming and going, I felt that something was flowing through me and it was like complete harmony and everything was easy. (Meyer-Dohm, graduate of Kalakshetra, performer and teacher for 15 years)

You’re asking great questions and I wish I had more tangible experience of spirituality through the music and dance that I could
share with you. My guru, T. Viswanathan (Balasaraswati’s brother) was not given to talking about spiritual experience in music—it was much more something one could observe about him non-verbally, in the way he was devoted to music. He really taught in this way by example; if I would ask something about the spirituality of the music, he would usually smile and say, “Practice.” So, while I was certainly drawn to Indian music by spirituality when I began to study with Viswa it quickly became centered in the work of singing. I noticed when I was a student that some other gurus of music were quite comfortable speaking philosophically and in great detail about things such as rasa, though I also remember some fine scholars such as David Shulman telling me they felt rasa theory simply didn’t apply in the present day. (Allen, Chair, Associate Professor of Music, Coordinator of Asian Studies, Wheaton College)

I fully agree with you that this art has a deeply spiritual quality, both while performing or witnessing it. I have not studied much theory and therefore cannot make any comments regarding you suggestions. There are rare moments that I experience while dancing, moments of absolute quiet amidst all the activity and it is that I seek each time I perform.” (Govind, renowned bharata natyam performer and teacher)
My experiences studying with Balasaraswati and performing this great art have led me to firmly believe that all the great masters who contributed their insights and knowledge of yoga, music, dance, painting, philosophy, literature, etc. ultimately understood that a synthesis of this great wisdom into a dance form would be a powerful conduit to create a divine presence for the observer. For the artist the experience is very much like you are describing and what Bala often told me I should embrace. If you embrace these wonderful experiences, they unfold inside you. The internalization of this art is essential for your conveying the ultimate truth and beauty so necessary for the audiences to experience. You are a conduit! I doubt rationalizing every aspect of what you experience enhances your understanding of what actually happens as the art evolves within you. (Poursine, disciple of T. Balasaraswati, teacher, renowned performer, held faculty positions at Wesleyan University and Denison University)

Each of the dancers that responded shared a common experience of calm, a moment in time when the technique flowed effortlessly. They were filled with a sense of peace and connectedness coupled with intense joy. All emphasize that these states of being did not occur with each practice or with each performance. These are savored moments, the nectar of the dance. It is significant that Ms. Poursine identifies the dance
form as “a powerful conduit to create a divine presence for the observer.” Dancers and musicians also observe that the techniques are to be practiced, practiced, and practiced. It seems clear that these artists believe that dance and music are spiritual practices to be realized in a personal way, that to analyze is not important, but that to live in the process is. This belief was supported when my teacher, Sarada Hoffinan (Disciple of Rukmini Devi, senior teacher of Kalakshetra C.F.A.) once told me with regret that “everyone is writing about dance. Nobody is dancing.”

At best I can say... It makes so much sense. In different Yogic traditions we are not allowed to do any mudra until the teacher believes that our nervous system is established and equanimous enough to receive that energy that mudra attracts and or draws out of us. The premise particularly in the Iyengar tradition is to sustain asana practice over a long period of time before venturing into pranayama and mudra. I believe that there needs to be a tremendous respect for the mudras as well as the breath. My teacher’s influence regarding getting the physical vessel strong and resilient enough to hold the energy that comes through pranayama makes sense to me. Devotion to the deepest and truest meaning of self is where the true ‘connection’ to the spirit invoked by dances using mudra and yantra (I love the idea of the body as a yantra) occurs. With their teacher and studies they develop the intuitive that brings the mudra into the universal consciousness experience.
As for the body alignments being symbolic _yantra_, that makes so much sense to me. There is a forced and almost awkwardness to the deep squatting and the shifting eyes and the turned out feet, bent knee etc... But with the music, the _mudras_ of the hands, all awkwardness is transformed to a connection to something higher than the critical eye. (Duffy-Roth, Yoga practitioner, massage therapist)

Shurti and I had the most similar experience from those that responded. Significantly, both of our experiences took place while dancing in Chidambaram temple, home of Nataraja (Siva as the cosmic dancer). Smith recognizes that the Sanskrit text _Vyaghrapura Mahatmya_ (15.18-33) correlates the _cakras_ to specific locations in India. Chidambaram is equated with the _anahata_ or heart _cakra_. Smith furthers the symbolism of Chidambaram as he states that “Not only is the _Cit Sabha_ [Chidambaram] the heart of the world and the heart of the individual self, but it also houses the _Rahasya_, the Secret” (83). Ritual texts speak of the _Rahasya_ as a _yantra_ following the form of a modified _Sricakra_ [Sriyantra]. This _yantra_ is said to be located to the right of Nataraja hidden behind a curtain (Smith 83). In yogic philosophy, the heart is where the Lord dances. This is where Shurti and I danced, in the heart of the world, facing this curtain. That one event connects _bharata natyam_, yoga (_cakras_), and _tantra_ (_yantra_ of _Rahasya_ as well as _yantra_ of the temple architecture).
Section VII.

Conclusion

“The art of India should be taken in one glance of subconscious interplay” (Coomarswamy 5). Subconscious interplay implies an intuitive identification with the form presented. Intuitive identification with the cosmos and innate understanding of unity is the foundation of Indian thought. The goal of traditional Indian arts is to produce anandha in the artist and in the rasika; this is the function of form in traditional Indian arts. All traditional Indian arts are broken down and classified into minute detail but it is not these details alone that Dr. Coomarswamy speaks of. The result of these details “taken in one glance” is of importance. The Vastusutra Upanisad significantly recognizes “the psychological fact that sense-impressions through the eyes and ears have a more compelling, a more direct action on the subconscious strata of the soul than discursive arguments. The subconscious obeys and is directly dependent on universal cosmic laws. When art-forms take their being from fundamental cosmic principles, they participate in the essential structure of the universe and contain a natural symbolism to which unsophisticated human beings respond instinctively, unconsciously” (Boner 6, 7).

In his book Sacred Geometry, Philosophy and Practice, Lawlor observes “All sense organs function in response to geometrical or proportional—not quantitative—differences inherent in the stimuli they receive” (5). He further explains that “our different perceptual faculties such as sight, hearing, touch and smell are a result of various proportioned reductions of one vast spectrum of vibratory frequencies … [resulting in] a geometry of perception” (5). Lawlor concludes that the “content of our experience results from
immaterial, abstract, geometric architecture which is composed of harmonic waves of energy, nodes of relationality, melodic forms spring forth from the eternal realm of geometric proportions”(5). Lawlor clearly substantiates Boner’s claim of unconscious response to natural symbolism. Lawlor also supports Chandralekhar’s, Rukmini Devi’s understanding of the power of “God geometrics”.

The details of Bharata natyam technique create a highly geometric structure that is the epitome in symmetry. Its mission to bring the divine to the dancer and knowledgeable observer has been substantiated in this paper. Years of dancing and practice penetrate the dancer’s mind and body. The audience can also experience the spiritual offering on many layers.

When the basic stances and movements of bharata natyam are broken down into geometric shapes with navel as the center, beautiful patterns form that look very much like yantras. There is balance, a center focal point around which movement takes place, and the outer perimeter formed by the extension of the limbs in movement. The body is highly adorned with little to no stage decoration. The observer is focused exclusively on the dancer. The outer perimeter of movement mimics the boundary of a yantra that sanctifies the inner space, the direct space of the dance, for spiritual contemplation. The energy within this boundary is highly charged with movement and sound vibration.

Most dance items begin with the dancer at center stage; at the place of Brahman (Natya Shastra 8) in samapadam (the ‘relaxed’ position in dance) the dancer clearly becomes a human axis mundi (the vertical pole uniting heaven and earth). This resembles the jarjara (flagstaff of Indra) mentioned in the Cilappatikaram, the stick which Matavi worshipped before she was symbolically married to it on her debut performance. This
pole also represents the path that Sakti travels in hatha yoga to unite with Siva. The emphasis on the vertical pole is present in ancient texts, in sculpture, and in the dance.

From this center point of the stage, the dancer moves away but always returns. In this floor yantra, center-stage is the bindu, the place of Brahman, and the place from which movement commences and returns. The floor space is defined first by the perimeter of the stage, and then by the movement. Before any classical bharata natyam program begins, a specific song is sung to Lord Ganesha. This is reminiscent of readying the stage that is specified in the Natya Shastra before art can formally commence. This also resembles the process of purification or consecration of the material that all Indian artists go through, whether it is architecture, painting, sculpting, or the yagna fire ritual. In a traditional bharata natyam performance the dancer remains on stage, within the parameter of a floor yantra, within the sacramental space of divine contemplation. The dancer only crosses this parameter at the finish of the program.

Thus the physical structure of bharata natyam technique forms a yantra within the body, and the choreography creates a yantra within the space of the stage. It is the Tantric belief that the energy of a yantra must be stimulated by use of a mantra, of sound vibrations in a repetitive nature. The pneumonic syllable with which a dancer learns the adavus creates an energizing mantra. The teacher verbally repeats Sanskrit syllables in specific meter endlessly while the student learns the adavus. Once the adavus are learned, the students internalize these syllables and repeat them mentally when practicing the steps individually and within combinations of steps leading to dances. Eventually the steps can be made without the aid of the sollukattu mirroring the progression of the Tantric aspirant whose journey is aided by an external diagram that is internalized, and
finally no longer needed. These syllables facilitate identification of steps in correct meter giving appropriate pauses, the ever-important *akasha* (space, pause, moment of silence). The practical study of *bharata natyam* emphases the clarity of line and proper beat. Each movement should finish on the beat. This forms a series of freeze frames, stills of geometric shapes emphasized further when taking into consideration the placement of the jewelry at the head, neck, wrists, waist, and ankles. The lines formed through the structure of the dance flash to the subconscious of the spectator. I suggest that these geometric shapes formed in freeze frames overlay to create an energized *yantra* for the audience. The audience is subconsciously lead toward the center, and out again.

*Sollukattu* is used to focus the dancer, dispelling distraction. The repetition of mnemonic syllables acts as a *japa* (religious practice of repetition). The sound vibrations from the recitation first externally and then internally create a *mantra* that energizes the *yantra* formed within the body. This concentration for the dancer directs the focus and energy to the central channel at the base of the spine and initiates the awakening of the *kundalini* and directs its travel upward into union with the *Shiva* energy keeping the focus on the spiritual energy.

A basic feature of *bharata natyam* is also the stamping. The stamping continuously reestablishes the center for the dancer. Rhythmical stamping energizes this defined space with its vibrations and aids the role of *mantra* keeping the focus on spiritual energy.

The *Tantric* practitioner visits the deities placed within the structure of the *yantra* to bring them closer to the center, to the ultimate unity. The *hatha* yoga aspirant visits the deities while awakening the *Shakti* energy and initiating its travel through each of the
cakra. As Balasaraswati has noted, the structure of the traditional bharata natyam program is designed to lead the spectator as well as the dancer through the different halls of the temples. Each deity is visited as they enter into the ‘inner sanctum’ of the varnam where they experience unity. This study has shown that a correlation between spiritual practice and bharata natyam exists. As with all spiritual paths, an active intention must be made. The structure of bharata natyam carried forth from the devadasi to the modern dancer is outlined as a spiritual quest. There has to be a concentration towards this realization of union. The greatness of Hinduism is in its multileveled approach to spirituality. Each person, dancer or spectator comes with his/her own experiences and readiness for comprehension. Bharata natyam can be a means to gently guide all toward the ultimate goal of union with the self. Through entertainment and natya, bhakti is nurtured and moral actions are contemplated. Through nrtta, a conscious or subconscious journey toward Brahman commences. Bharata natyam has many levels from which to nurture, suiting all levels of spiritual maturity.

This study supports my belief that the structure and form of bharata natyam are a wellspring of spiritual potency. This structure has survived changes in spiritual and political climates. The relationship this dance form has to yantra, tantra, and yoga, all means for achieving spiritual development, underscores that bharata natyam is a spiritual vehicle surpassing a mere form of entertainment and intellectual contemplation of spiritual truths. The reasoning behind the unnatural physical positions of this dance has become clear; the geometrics formed and the focus and tensions created serve to awaken the kundalini energy by activating chakra points. The geometric Tantric points are an
active part of this dance form and integral to its spirituality. I have affirmed my experience and belief that *bharata natyam* is a worthy spiritual force.

Has this study proven my hypothesis that *mudra, mantra, and asana* aspects of *bharata natyam nrtta* of are used as *tantric* and *kundalini* tools to bring the artist and the *rasika* into union with the Divine? Can anything so esoteric be conclusively proven? This study has certainly produced evidence of connection of these three practices and developed strong arguments that give credence toward the support of my hypothesis. Testimony is offered from others that have experienced the spiritual power of *bharata natyam* along with their contemplation upon this thesis.

*Bharata natyam* began as ritual worship and as a living art form continues to evolve. Can the spirituality of the dance be maintained? The testimonies in this study suggest that the spiritual components are still present and effective. I conclude that structure of the technique must be maintained in order for spiritual affect to continue. I further suggest that deeper study of sacred geometry will intensify our recognition of clues to our cosmic connection and speed our journey toward union with the divine.
WORK CITED


Duffy-Roth, Patricia. (Re: questions of connection and spiritual potency). 18 June 2007. Availability: triciaduffy@comcast.net.


Meyer-Dohm, Sita Sophia. (Re: help! w/ my paper). 6 June 2007. Availability: sita­sophia@gmx.de.


Upadhyay, Shruti. (Re: [exkalakshetra] long time coming…). 7 June 2007. Availability: nyshruti@gmail.com.


APPENDIX A.

Excerpt From the Cilappatikaram

(Atikal, Canto III. 10-170, p.34-40)

For seven years she studied dancing,
Singing, and the art of enhancing her beauty---
Every one of them perfectly. At twelve, she wished
To perform before the king of heroic anklets.

An expert in the traditions of the dance, her tutor
Knew well the rules of the folk and classical styles.
He paired different types of dances
With the figures of song. He was adept
In the traditional modes of the eleven mythic dances,
With their appropriate songs and resounding drums,
In mime, singing, rhythm, and beat.
He was familiar too with gestures made
With one hand or both hands, and with hand poses
For mime and the dance. He distinguished
between the one- and two-handed poses,
Never confused the pure with the expressive,
Or the kurvai with the vari dance.

He played well, her music teacher, the lute
And flute, following the beat. He had
A good voice, and from the drums even teased a low note
Or two. All these sounds he harmonized
With the dance: for the vari and atal, he played
The appropriate music. He knew well all the fine
Nuances of the impeccable tecikam music.
Guided by the exact conventions of the texts,
He classified and elaborated upon the different types
Of dances, and songs that consort with them,
In the true spirit of their composers.

For his skill in Tamil the poet of exquisite song
Was renowned everywhere in the Tamil country,
Bound by the roaring sea. An expert
On the theater, he knew its two sections,
The vettiyal and potuviyal, knew the melody
Improvised by the music teacher. Guided
By the exact conventions of the texts,
And aware of the faulty phrases of his rivals,
He was resolute to avoid them in his own work.

Her drummer was skilled in every type of dance,
In musical notes, singing, Tamil
Ways of speaking, melody, rhythm,
Modes of beating time, and the use
Of words of diverse origins. He was conscious
Of flaws in a performance. Playing, he would combine
Single beats, allow time for double beats
To be heard, and blend them with the flute, lute,
And voice. With his fingertips he would subdue
The drum, so other instruments are heard. At times
Drown them in the thunder of the barrel drum.

Her flutist was versed in the traditional lore.
He knew the way hard and soft consonants
Were mellowed to ravish the ear. He knew
Four kinds of trills, and listened with attention
To the first and fifth notes, and with ease
Chimed in with the sound of the timbal,
Kept time with the drummer. Progressing
By fifths, he tuned the ragas on the lute,
Closely followed the singer, improvised
On what he heard, and forestalled what was to come.
He showed his knowledge of melodies
By playing note by note so that each
Sound was heard without a flaw.

Her lute player was a wizard. To establish
The seven scales within the pattern
Of fourteen notes, he half plucked the low first
And the high seventh to tune the third.
The sixth he produced by the remaining half
Of the elegant and robust seventh which now vanished
Into the third. As the sixth faded, the third
Dissolved with it. Likewise, the rest of the notes
Melted into the others. He played on all
The fourteen strings, from the low fourth
To the high third, and sounded the cempalai
In the new tradition. In order, the scales
Would arise: the patumalai from the third, cevvali
From the second, arum from the first, koti
From the seventh, vilari from the sixth, and mercem
From the fifth. It is thus they were combined.
The notes of the lute got lower in pitch
From the left to the right. With the flute, they got lower
From the right to the left. An expert lute
Player can harmonize the low, high
And median notes to ravish the ear.

With care a site was chosen, and the quality
Of the soil inspected, following what learned
Men had prescribed, for construction a stage.
To measure the stage, the texts recommended
A bamboo rod--- the distance of a span
Between the joints, and twenty-four thumbs
Long---from the sacred hills. The stage
Was eight rods long, seven deep,
And one high. It had two grand doors,
Conveniently located. Four rods was the distance
Between the crossbeams and the platform.
Images of demigods, placed above the stage,
Were worshiped and praised. Bright lamps
Glowed at the four corners so that the pillars
Cast no shadows. The stage curtain,
The curtain between the pillars to the right,
And the overhanging drop curtain were all drawn
By cords. And from the painted canopy flowed
Strings of rare pearls, wreaths and garlands
Of flowers. Such was the unusual workmanship
Of the stage. The handle of a splendid white parasol,
Taken in battle from illustrious kings,
Was the sacred rod, its middle done up
With a plate of the purest campunata gold,
Its joints inset with the nine gems
In a pattern. An emblem of Indra’s son,
Jayanta, it was offered worship in the palace
Of the Cola king who protects with his white parasol.
On the auspicious day when a dancer had to use
The rod, she washed it with holy waters
Collected in a golden pot, and later wreathed it
With a garland. And with a blessing, it was offered
To the royal elephant with a frontlet of gold ornaments.
In unison with other instruments, the drum
Resounded. The king appeared with his five groups
Of advisors, walked round the chariot, and gave
The rod to the court poet seated in it.
In a procession, they went round the town,
Entered the theater, and installed the rod.

Strictly in order the musicians took
Their seats. Her right foot Matavi placed
Forward, and stepped on the stage. Reached
The pillar on the right, stood by it as required
By custom. And near the pillar on the left clustered
Other dancers likewise following an old custom.
So that virtue might flourish and evil vanish,
Two kinds of song were sung in turn.
At the end of the benediction all the musical instruments
Were sounded in unison. The lute followed
The flute; the barrel drum was tuned to the lute;
And the pot drum followed the barrel drum.
In unison with the pot drum resounded
The left-hand drum. Instruments tuned to it
Played in harmony. Two strokes made
One beat. And eleven beats were invariably counted
Following established practice. After the performance
Of the introductory dance, the auspicious song
In the palai mode was sung with improvisations
Without straining its lofty measure.
Matavi knew well the four impeccable parts
Of a song: she measured out three and ended
With one, and completed them with five beats.
Later, she danced to the varnam songs. Performed
The classical dance, and her skill fused
The five-beat mode of the folk and classical styles
Into one style. A golden vine
It was that danced, for her performance
Showed she knew well the text on dancing.

From the king, who protects, she received a garland
Of leaves and flowers, and one thousand and eight pieces
Of gold, the customary gift to dancers
That held the sacred rod and performed
For the first time. This garland Matavi
Put in the hands of her doe-eyed maid,
A hunchback, asked her to wait in the street
Where the elite of the town walked about, and offer it
For sale, thus:

“A thousand and eight pieces
Of the most excellent gold is this garland worth.
Who buys the garland becomes the husband
Of our vinelike girl.”

The gold-banged Matavi of Pumpukar caused
Her fame to spread over the earth. On the stage
She showed by word of mouth her talent
Concerning numbers, letters, the five types
Of literary Tamil, the four melodic patterns,
And the eleven kinds of dance that followed them.
Appendix B.

**Single and Double Hand Gestures Used in Bharata Natyam**

**Referencing Important Dance Text**

**Noting Corresponding Color and Deity**

**NS. The Natya Sastra of Bharatamini**  **AD. Nandikesvara. Abhinayadarpanam**

Color and Deities are listed in this translation of the NS noting that they come from commentaries (151-2).
Asamuta Hastas

Single hand Gestures

Plate 1
NS. Pataka NS. IX 18-26, p.133-4
AD. Pataka AD. 88-99, p.49

Color: White
Deity: Supreme Brahman

Plate 2
NS. Tripataka NS. IX. 27-36, p. 134-5
AD. Tripataka AD. 100-2, p. 49

Plate 3
NS.
AD. Ardhapataka AD. 103-4, p.49-50
Plate 4
NS. Kartarimukha NS. IX. 38-41, p.135
AD. Kartarimukha AD. 105-7, p.50
Color: Copper
Deity: Vishnu wielding discuss

Plate 5
NS.
AD. Mayura AD. 108-10, p.50

Plate 6
NS. Ardhacandra NS. IX. 42-4, p.135
AD. Ardhacandra AD. 111-3, p.50
Color: Smokey
Deity: Mahadeva
Plate 7
NS. Arala NS. IX. 45-51, p.135-6
AD. Arala AD. 114, p.50
Color: Red
Deity: Vasudeva

Plate 8
NS. Sukatunda NS. IX. 51-3, p.136
AD. Sukatunda AD. 115-6, p.50
Color: Red

Plate 9
NS. Mushti NS. IX. 54-5, p.136
AD. Mushti AD. 116-8, p.51
Color: Blue
Deity: Moon
Plate 10
NS. *Sikhara*  NS. IX. 56-8, p. 136-7
AD. *Sikhara* AD. 118-21, p. 51
Color: Dusty
Deity: Kamadeva

Plate 11
NS. *Kapittha*  NS. IX. 58-9, p. 137
AD. *Kapittha* AD. 121-4, p. 51
Color: White
Deity: Padma Garbha-Vishnu

Plate 12
NS. *Katakaamukha*  NS. IX. 60-3, p. 137
AD. *Katakaamukha* AD. 124-7, p. 51
Color: Copper
Deity: Raghurama
Plate 13
NS. Sucimukha  NS. IX. 64-79, p.137-9
AD. Suci        AD. 127-31, p. 51-2
Color: White
Deity: Visvakarman

Plate 14
NS. Chandrakala AD. 132-3, p.52

Plate 15
NS. Padma Kosa  NS. IX. 80-3, p.139
AD. Padmakosa   AD. 134-7, p.52
Color: White
Deity: Bhargava
Plate 47
NS.
AD. Nagabandha   AD. 201, p.58

Plate 48
NS.
AD. Khatva   AD. 202, p.58

Plate 49
NS.
AD. Bherunda   AD. 203, p.58-59
Plate 19  *Kutmattu Adavu*