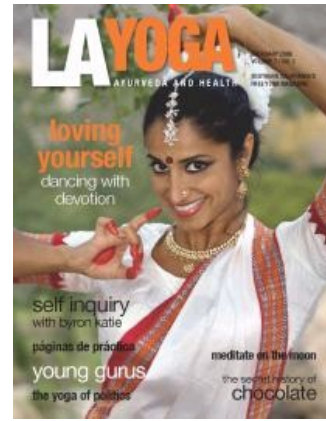


Dance As Devotion

Making An Offering To The Earth

by Hemalayaa



I touch my hands first to the Earth and then to my forehead, in the sacred gesture of *Bhumi Pranam* (the salutations to Mother Earth); I am asking for her blessing.

This offering is my prayer before I begin the traditional warm-ups that initiate my practice of calculated rhythmic foot stamps played in a staccato rhythm. I slide the gaze of my eyes in evocative and deliberate glances while my hands form a series of precise *mudra* (gesture). My entire body creates shape in rhythm, moving in opposing forces.

I am studying Odissi, a form of classical Indian dance, from the state of Orissa.

In India, the women who are devoted to the temple through this devotional practice are called *Maharis* or *Devi Dasis*. Preparing themselves to be of service through their bodies, they dance privately in prayer for the temple deities.

Swaying toward Dance

When I was a young girl I adored watching Bollywood movies, the musicals featuring classical Indian music and dance with glamorous women who made this often grueling performance style appear easy. I imitated their moves: the intricate hand *mudra*, eye movements and facial expressions. I performed for members of my large extended family who were always visiting our small Toronto apartment. I flicked the lights and hopped onto a coffee table to stamp my feet with ankle bells on, believing I was a Bollywood star, shimmying for as long I could keep the adults watching before they drifted into the kitchen to snack on samosas or pakoras.

To have a chance of mastering classical dance forms such as Odissi, I was advised to start young. My mother complied – trying to force this dance on me for years because this art form was “proper,” the equivalent in her mind of charm school or ballet. Although I loved to dance, I resisted at the time, because I was certain her only motive was to make her – and me – more respectable. I didn’t understand the true meaning of classical Indian dance, or how it was related to my childhood play.

The saddest part is that for years, I didn’t dance at all.

Only after I’d begun to study yoga in my early 20s did I begin to understand that dance could awaken in me an experience of the divine. A friend had suggested I attend a retreat with Shiva Rea, who had organized a Trance Dance. My body already felt open from the full day of yoga practice, and when the music queued up, it was an old Hindi song that my dad often played when I was a little girl. My heart burst and I danced as though I was six years old again when my stage was the coffee table. This time, it no longer mattered if anyone was watching.

In this moment, my love of dance was rekindled and it wasn’t long after when I experienced an Odissi performer who was presenting a ballad to Saraswati (the goddess of knowledge, classical arts, and wisdom).

A friend and I casually talked about “getting into” Indian dance. Seeing this devotion embodied, we knew we had found our teacher. The irony was that this was precisely the dance that my mom had tried to force on me, but by this point in my life so much had changed. I’d begun practicing *bhakti* (devotional) yoga, enjoyed reading Vedic scriptures and had a vague awareness that Odissi was known for its emphasis on devotion.

Yet I still had a lot to learn. When talking with our teacher, she looked at me with patience when I brazenly commented, “We should be able to learn pretty fast, since we’re Indian...” Let me tell you – there was nothing easy about it.

For months, we practiced moving our eyes from side to side, from the upper corner to lower corner and right

to left and up to down. We counted the beats or *bols* with a staccato *tha ithi nakha thini*. I had to use all my strength and focus to practice. We didn't even get to the actual dancing for months. We practiced only the traditional warm-ups and steps for each *chauka* (square) and *tribunghi* (three bends position). In the first year, we learned only five steps, having five more to learn before even attempting any full dances.

After all this time of practicing what felt like a boot camp with every movement, every step and every drop of sweat, my body was becoming an instrument for my *sadhana* (devotional practice). The discipline and focus required during those lessons gave me a sense of purpose, confidence and calm that I'd never before known. I lost myself in practice, mastering this ancient art of movement. My body was becoming more and more like the stone figures representing the male and female aspects of the deities found on the temple walls in India.

It's no wonder that the Odissi movements are literally carved in stone. I prayed to become a stone carving myself – it seemed to be necessary in order to hold a pose for the amount of time required to tell the story. 'We have to become strong like those stones in order to carry this dance to all the manifestations of the divine,' I mused, thinking of the sacred statues.

Becoming the *Devi Dasi*; Invoking the Goddess

After months of honing the ability to hold my body in the deep squat positions and stamp my feet without moving my hips or shoulders while simultaneously gliding my torso, eyes and hands in opposite directions, it came time to perform. I was still building strength, still struggling to dance with a soft facial expression while the sweat dripped off my brow.

We were invited to do a blessing for the opening of a new yoga studio, so we began learning *Mangalacharan* (Invocation), a traditional first piece that our teacher insisted was simple. On the night of our first Invocation, I felt a mix of terror and excitement: I was about to become the *Devi Dasi* and wear the elaborate costume, drape myself in the jewelry and adorn myself with a colorful palette.



Entering the space of worship, we lit the incense and candle at the altar and collected our flower petal offerings. In this moment, something took over, and we spontaneously started chanting *Aum Nama Shivaya*. Shiva Nataraj, is the lord of dance and perhaps we were calling out to him for help, or maybe he was there to witness the offering. At that moment I felt how silent and how powerful the dance really was, and that we were at temple within our bodies.

We performed a ballad to *Bhumi* (Mother Earth), *Jaganath* (Lord of the Universe) and then to Ganesh, the lord of new beginnings and of obstacles. As we were telling the stories with our bodies and the music, I knew why I had been drawn to this dance, to Odissi. These devotional stories of Lord Krishna, Ganesh, *Jaganath* and *Bhumi* require precision and a one-pointedness of mind. Each dance was akin to making an offering, every step we made on the Earth was a footfall with reverence on *Bhumi's* temple.


In this performance and everyone thereafter, in every practice session, I begin and end with my hands first touching *Bhumi*, the Earth Mother, and then my forehead to ask for her blessing while I stamp on her. This gesture is one of many that allow me to see my own body as an instrument of devotion. I am a *Devi Dasi*, even if my temple is in the privacy of my own home. I will always be dancing with and for God.


Yoga and Indian dance teacher, Hemalayaa, leads yoga, meditation, Indian dance and heart awareness journeys. She has a gift for inspiring even the shyest of participants to own and express their beauty, sacredness and femininity. Her latest DVD, Bollywood Burn, was released in January 2008. hemalayaa.com

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