

Dancing Presence

By Cain and Revital Carroll

A group of dancers make their way to the stage and begin to move. In each you appreciate the grace, poise and athletic beauty resulting from years of training and dedication to their art. All are equally adept in their movements, in perfect time with the music, brilliant in their technical display. Yet somehow your eye is unmistakably drawn to one dancer over all the others. There is a power in her that captures your attention, something intangible yet undeniable that touches you, ignites you from inside. You scoot forward on your seat and lean in a little, trying to get closer to the feeling. With the expansion of your next breath, you feel a vastness open inside your body. As you exhale, a shimmer runs through your spine. Mental chatter dissolves like mist in sunlight. The reference point of “self” vanishes, and you are held in the intimate freshness of the moment, the momentum, the dance.

What a gift to find yourself in rapture’s embrace!

It is somewhat mysterious though; how unplanned, and seemingly by accident, we discover ourselves, from time to time, in the midst of such beauty. While these experiences may in fact come unsolicited, they are certainly not by accident. In those moments, there is certain willingness inside us, an openness, which makes us prone to grace. This willingness is a kind of surrender that opens us to experience Presence. When we behold Presence in others, it captivates us. When we dwell in it ourselves, the whole world opens.

Although so simple, Presence can easily elude us. It’s like trying to hold soap in the shower. When you grasp for it, it slips. When you have it, and tighten your grip keep it, it escapes you again. Yet, babies bask in Presence all day long. Deer, hawks and redwoods, seem to inhabit it all the time.

Revital: I spent my twenties mostly in India, dedicating myself to the study of Yoga, meditation, dance, and natural medicine. I was attending to a deep-seeded spiritual longing, a love for creative expression, and a desire to appreciate more fully the pleasures of being alive. It felt like exploring a delicate balance between asceticism and sensuality. Eventually, in the practice of Odissi Dance, I found the perfect union of the spiritual and sensual.

Odissi is a Classical Indian Dance form from the southeast region of India (now the modern state of Orissa). It traces its roots back thousands of years to the tantric temples of that region. Odissi is one of several ancient temple dance forms originally performed by Devadasis, or “divine-servants”, as part of the spiritual rituals of that time. The purpose of Odissi dance was to provide both the dancer and the audience with the prospect of embodying Divine Presence.

The Devadasi tradition was highly regarded over the ages and supported by rulers and kings for thousands of years. During the time of British rule, it lost the support of the affluent society and retreated into hiding. Through the modern revival of Odissi Dance, the sacred quality of the dance was reestablished in society, and its intimate link with Yoga and the deep spiritual traditions of India were preserved.

Odissi has a unique sculptural quality, where both movement and stillness are embraced. Rhythmic footwork and fluid movements, accompanied by mudras (hand gestures) and asanas (postures), are danced to the lilt of sacred poetry and yogic hymns expressing devotion and love. The dancer draws symmetric yantra-like forms in space, which weave together heaven, earth, humanity, and the four directions. The intricacy of subtle movements, performed in unison with complex rhythms, demands heightened awareness and concentration, that can deliver the dancer and audience into a state of unwavering Presence. This Presence serves as a doorway to usher both dancer and audience into an elevated state where divine beauty and vibrant aliveness capture the heart.

Cain: Following a very similar inner pull, I traveled to India, Nepal, China, Tibet, South American, and many other places to seek out traditional methods for cultivating body, mind, and spirit. Studying with yogis, Taoists, shaman, and Buddhists, I learned powerful ways of healing the body, settling the mind, and opening the heart. I practiced the methods I learned with dedication and persistence. However, it was not until years later that I would discover the common thread connecting all that I had learned.

It was amid the challenges of everyday life that I learned the true value of my spiritual disciplines. Tending to my ill mother, running a business, learning to be a stepfather and a loving husband; these have challenged me to boil my training down to its essence. That essence is Presence.

I have found that no matter what the immediate moment brings, if I relax my belly, soften my chest, slow my breathing, release my expectations, and give myself fully to what-is, there is a sense of freedom and ease. Events naturally take their course. If I push, rush, tense, or impose judgment, the situation becomes more difficult, people respond unfavorably, and I experience a loss of harmony.

It's ironic that what we possess innately as babies, we later have to mindfully cultivate as adults. This is no new phenomenon either. For thousands of years, sages from all corners of the world have been pointing at the importance remembering, or realizing, that simple essence that precedes all our efforts to find success or be happy. In Sanskrit texts dating back many centuries before Christ, the subject is addressed in-depth. Thousands of volumes have been written in an effort to point us in the direction of what we seek.

Presence.

It is both what you seek, and the way to apprehend it. It is what your lover loves in you. It is what your children want from you. It's what your friends and family need most from you. It is what allows the gift of who you are to shine in the world.

So, soften your belly, relax your chest, slow your breathing, and offer yourself fully to what ever arises in your day. Surrender your desire for things to be any different than the way they actually are. Do this again and again, as each new moment arises. Inside of this simple and profound surrender you will find an ocean of peace.

We'll see you there.

Cain and Revital Carroll are spending a year traveling, studying, teaching and writing. They will be in Anchorage May 21-30 to present a series of workshops and two performances of Odissi Dance. (See: HYPERLINK "<http://www.caincarroll.com/www.caincarroll.com>" and HYPERLINK "<http://www.caincarroll.com/www.shaktibhakti.com>.) For information on their Alaska visit, contact Jade Lady Meditation at 562-2863 or e-mail HYPERLINK "<http://www.caincarroll.com/selkins@gci.net> .