

Applying the Tools of Yoga for Dancers

A Few Experiential Observations

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Introduction

While it is evident that *yoga* evolved as a philosophical school of thought, what is equally evident is that it is also fundamentally an *anūsāsana-śāstra*, an experiential discipline.² Over the years, the teachings of *yoga* have always remained relevant for large sections of people on account of its inherent adaptability.

T Krishnamacharya, one of the foremost masters of *yoga* of the 19th century practiced all the limbs of *yoga* without compromising on their classicism. However, in the application of these tools of *yoga* for others, he was innovative and broad-minded in his approach and teaching methodology. In fact, his emphasis on adapting the teachings of *yoga* to suit individual requirements continues to be the hallmark of the approach followed at Krishnamacharya Yoga Mandiram, the institute founded by T Krishnamacharya's son and long-time student, TKV Desikachar. In this context, as a *yoga* therapist at the Krishnamacharya Yoga Mandiram, I wish to explore the possibilities of applying the tools of *yoga* specifically for dancers.

Bridging Philosophy and Practice

Applying Patañjali's 'Vyūha' in the Context of Dance and Dancers

Patañjali, in outlining the path that one must take in order to progressively

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² *Patañjali's Yogasūtra* 1.1

refine the mind, presents a four-step model in the second chapter of his *yogasūtra*.³

heya – anticipating and avoiding future suffering⁴

hetu – identifying the underlying cause of suffering, *avidya*⁵

hāna – to gradually progress from the delusion imposed by the Self's entanglement with the mind and senses, towards a state of clarity in thought, word and deed⁶

upāya – the means at one's disposal to reduce agitation and dullness of the mind while simultaneously strengthening clarity and discrimination⁷

From the perspective of philosophy, this model is very useful in understanding the root of our suffering and the means towards emancipation.

In the context of practitioners of dance, the purpose of Indian dance is without doubt spiritual. However, many dancers, may overlook the means by which dance attains its purpose – namely understanding and optimizing the functioning of body, breath and mind which essential in the practice of dance.

Nandikeśvara, in the invocatory verse of the work *Abhinaya-darpana*, highlights the inherently spiritual nature of dance in his oft-quoted verse

³ *Patañjali's Yogasūtra*, II.16, II.17, II. 25, II.26

⁴ *Patañjali's Yogasūtra*, II.16

⁵ *Patañjali's Yogasūtra*, II.23

⁶ *Patañjali's Yogasūtra*, II.25

⁷ *Patañjali's Yogasūtra*, II.26

आङ्गिकं भुवनं यस्य वाचिकं सर्ववाङ्मयम् ।

आहार्यं चन्द्रतारादि तं नुमः सात्त्विकं शिवम् ॥⁸

The four aspects, *āṅgika*, *vācika*, *āhārya* and *sāttvika* which are the foundation of *nāṭya* serve to adorn the supreme *śiva*, himself.

Many dancers, with or without the knowledge of the spiritual moorings of this form of art, over a period of time develop strain in various parts of the body owing to repeated use of certain limbs. It is for this reason that T Krishnamacharya emphasises the need for a "*sarva-aṅga-sādhana*" such as *yoga* to support and complement the practice of dance. Thus, we see that a pressing need for dancers is to be aware of and take steps to prevent the various bodily complications that may arise from their practice. While the body is the means used by the dancer for communicating, the breath plays an equally important supporting role. Further, dance requires great concentration, not only because it effectively stimulates both left and right brain activity⁹ but also in terms of intensity of focus required to emote the *sthāyi-bhāva* of any situation along with the associated *vibhāvas*, *anubhāvas* and *vyabhicāri-bhāvas* as well which are essential for the generation of *rasa*.¹⁰

As a practitioner and teacher of dance myself, and having injured myself and seen others suffering similar injuries, I feel that there is a lacuna in the practice methodology adopted by many dancers. Often, warm-up is cursory and limited to a few stretches.

⁸ *āṅgikam bhuvanaṁ yasya vācikaṁ sarvavāṅmayam |*
āhāryaṁ candratārādi taṁ numah sāttvikaṁ śivam ||

⁹ Brown, Steven, J. Martinez, Michael and M. Parsons, Lawrence, The Neural Basis of Human Dance, Retrived 09/09/2014

<http://cercor.oxfordjournals.org/content/16/8/1157.full>

¹⁰ Bhat, G K (1975), *Bharatanāṭya Mañjari*, Pune, Bhandarkar Oriental research Institute.

Relaxation after practice/performance is again a much neglected area. As a result, complaints of knee injuries and back pain are very common among dancers who perform frequently. Other physical problems that several dancers face is flatness of feet and tightness of the hip joint which prevents them from reaching the optimum half-sitting position. Physiologically, many dancers find it hard to regulate their breath, especially after a brisk round of dance, so they often tend to pant while trying to catch breath. At the mental level, a high degree of concentration is required to emote the different characters and situations being portrayed. Due to the intensity of the involvement, many dancers find that it takes some time to unwind after a performance.¹¹

This is where the tools of *yoga* can prove beneficial not merely in raising performance standards but also in enabling greater internalization of emotions in the dancer.

According to T Krishnamacharya,¹² *yoga* practices for any individual must factor in

- place of practice
- time of practice
- season
- age
- capacity
- interest

Further, TKV Desikachar highlights the *sūtra*, "*tasya bhūmiṣu viniyogaḥ*" (YS III.6) in the context of emphasizing the need for an individual-centric approach to the application of *yoga*'s tools, which KYM puts into practice.¹³

¹¹ Based on feedback received from Participants in a Yoga Intensive for Dancers, conducted by KYM between July 14th and 18th 2014

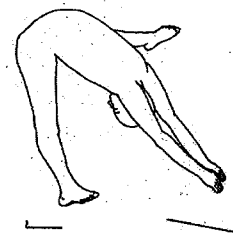
¹² Desikachar, TKV (commentary) (1998) *Yoga rahasya* (I.24, I.30), Chennai, Krishnamacharya Yoga Mandiram

¹³ Lecture Notes, June-August 2005

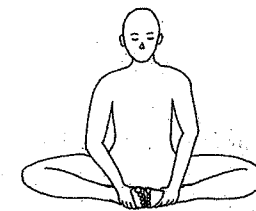
Applying āsana-s for Dancers

Let us take the case of *bharatanāṭya*, as the south Indian dance style previously known as "*Koothu*" or "*sadir*", is now known as. *Bharatanāṭya* requires a basic half-sitting posture, the *maṇḍala sthānam*¹⁴ (*arai mandi*), as its dominant stance. This position calls for the outward opening of the pelvis, a movement that is rarely used in other day-to-day contexts.

Postures like *upaviṣṭakoṇāsana*, *baddhakoṇāsana* etc. may be effective in preparing dancers for this lateral opening of the pelvis.



upavista-konāsana



baddha-konāsana

The constant stamping of the feet, may cause some strain in the tendons of the feet, possibly resulting in the development of flat feet, tendonitis etc. Postures like *tāḍāsana* can be used to stretch the legs and the feet, thereby relieving to some extent pain/strain in the feet. Ankle flexions and extensions may also be introduced by slight adaptations of *apānāsana* and *ūrdhvaṣṭa pādāsana*. The lightheadedness of movements used in *bharatanāṭya* also imposes some strain on the spinal muscles.

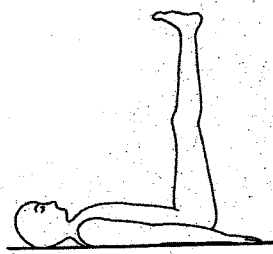
¹⁴ Subrahmanyam, Dr. Padma (1985), *Bharatakalai – Oru Kotpadu*, Chennai, Vanathi Padippagam



tadāsana



apanāsana

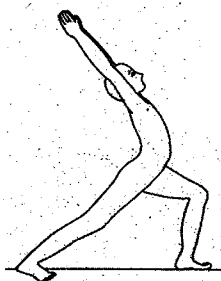


*urdhva-prasṛta-
padāsana*

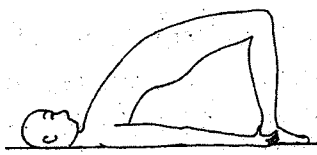
Postures such as *vīrabhadrāsana* *dvipādapīṭham* and *bhujāṅgāsana* may be applied to enhance strength of the back muscles.



bhujāṅgāsana



Vīrabhadrāsana



dvipādapīṭham

Knee pain is another common complaint faced by dancers owing to repetitive weight-bearing movements, in standing and seated positions, not to mention the jumps and twirls. Some of the classical postures such as *urdhva-prasṛta-padāsana* and *bhujāṅgāsana* may be adapted to strengthen the knees and also increase flexibility.

It must be noted here that these are merely suggestions based on my experience

as a dancer and a *yoga* therapist. Actual application of the tool may happen only after a thorough examination of the individual seeking *yogic* intervention.

Applying *prāṇāyāma* for Dancers

Most styles of Indian dance require considerable endurance and stamina. Also most styles of Indian dance like *bharatanāṭyam*, *kathak*, *mohini-āṭṭam* and *kuchipudi* alternate between segments of *nṛtta* (aesthetic movements without expression) and *abhinaya* (expression). Usually at the end of a fast-paced *nṛtta* segment, many dancers may feel out of breath and take a while to settle down into a slower pattern of breathing.

Prāṇāyāma as a powerful tool of regulating and lengthening the breath can give dancers a deeper awareness of the quality of their breath and also provide an understanding into the integration of breath and movement so as to optimize their performance capabilities. Practices of *prāṇāyāma* that work on lengthening the exhalation and the inhalation gradually, building up to a ratio that later integrates retention of breath after inhalation can also prove to be beneficial. *Nāḍīśodhana prāṇāyāma*, which requires alternate nostril breathing may also be a powerful way of creating breath awareness and also lengthening the breath.

Applying *Bhāvana* and *Dhyāna* for Dancers

Dance in many ways is no different from meditation. The juxtaposition of hand and feet movements not to mention the high precision placement of the torso and other major and minor limbs (*aṅgas*, *upāṅgas* and *pratyāṅgas*) requires intense mental focus and left-right brain coordination. With the inclusion of elements, internalization and then externalize myriad expressions requires exemplary meditative focus. In fact, the physical training that a dancer undergoes is only a foundation for the higher element of *sāttvika abhinaya*.

In this context the remark, "We train the body only to forget about it", of noted danseuse Dr. Padma Subrahmanyam during an interaction is worth noting.

Again, a quote from *abhinaya-darpana* (verse 37), highlights the intensity of focus required for a dancer.

यतो हस्तः ततो दृष्टिः यतो दृष्टिः ततो मनः ।
यतो मनस्ततो भावः यतो भावस्ततो रसः ॥¹⁵

It is only when the movements of the hand are followed by the eyes, with the involvement of the mind and through the internalization of feeling that dance acquires its aesthetics, thereby enabling the generation of *rasa* in the *rasika*.¹⁶

The practice of dance requires great one-pointedness of mind, for the ultimate purpose of dance is the evocation of *rasa*.

The *rasas* are traditionally eight in number and the thread that unites these is the ninth, *śānta*, which corresponds to a predominance of *sattva* that shines through all the other myriad portrayals.

The tool of *bhāvana*, which in the tradition of the Krishnamacharya Yoga Mandiram has to do with guided visualization of a chosen object, may be used to help the dancer visualize the entire sequence prior to the actual performance, as a way of enhancing mental focus and preparing the body and mind to focus on the performance.¹⁷

Dance, as an art form, needs an 'attentive' and 'peaceful' mind. Meditation (*dhyāna*) plays an important role in training the mind to make it productive.

Meditation as a tool can be used in the following ways for dance.¹⁸

(1) To be done daily, to make the mind, habitually calm and attentive.

¹⁵ *yato hastah tato dr̥ṣṭiḥ yato dr̥ṣṭiḥ tatho manah
yato manastatho bhāvaḥ yato bhāvaḥ tatho rasaḥ*

¹⁶ Meaning of the verse as explained by Subrahmanyam, Dr. Padma (1985) Op. Cit.

¹⁷ Lecture Notes from a Presentation by Mr.S Sridharan, Trustee, KYM, at a Yoga intensive for Dancers' organized by KYM on 16th July 2014

¹⁸ *ibid*

- (2) In meditation, visualise the various expressions required for dance
- (3) Use the mind to focus on the activity of dancing and make it creative and spontaneous

For (1), one can go through a meditative practice course planned with *āsana* and *prāṇāyama* as preparation and focus on parts of the body. Using a sound and visual, the mind can be focused to make it attentive and calm. For (2) after the first part of the meditative practice, one can sit down and visualize the various movements for the individual dance pieces. For (3) one can bring the mind to a state of rest and attention just before performance to enhance the creativity and reduce mental fatigue

Conclusion

Thus, we see that there exist many areas of commonality in the practice of dance and *yoga*. The tools of *yoga* may further play an important complementary role in enhancing the performance of a dancer, on account of its inherent body-mind-breath integrated approach. The hallmark of the Krishnamacharya tradition is its inclusiveness and the adaptability of key techniques to suit individual needs. This individual-centric approach no doubt benefits everybody, but it can be used, if applied appropriately and intelligently, to effectively address the needs of specific groups of people, such as dancers, both in terms of enhancing stamina, endurance and performance capabilities and also in terms of facilitating reflection and creativity.