

Aditi Mangaldas

Kathak dancer

'Dancing gives me immense satisfaction, and a sense of well-being'

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Aditi Mangaldas is a Kathak dancer.

What does spirituality mean to you?

It is a very loaded term, so I look at it very simply. For me it is about always having a wonder at life, at the beauty of life, at the beauty of passion, of relationships; it is about that something that makes you feel life is all worth it.

Birth and death are the two fixed things we know. In between it is like an ever-flowing river, learning from its environment, getting nourished.

Did you always have this sense of wonder?

How can you but not have wonder at life? It surprises me that anybody would take it for granted. Just look at a garden, or at the stars at night - keep your eyes and senses open... How could you not feel it?

What about dark periods in life?

I probably took some very wrong decisions and I went through very dark phases, they were part of growing up, they are part of life. But I never felt abandoned. My family was always there, and always

gave me a real freedom to explore. Also, I was so lucky to have grown up in a family very close to J. Krishnamurti. He would stay with my grandmother in Bombay during the summers, or with my aunt in Delhi, where I would also be. I must have imbibed a lot from him, though I guess mostly through my grandmother, who was very close to him.

In what way did he influence you?

There was a great aura around him. At times I was actually quite afraid of him. Because somehow, in his presence, I had a sense of being completely naked, completely exposed. All your projections and personas would be revealed to you and you would be confronted with yourself in very strange ways, at times in very frightening ways. You had no choice but SEE that this is you, and this is actually what is going on inside of you. Regardless, I always had a feeling of being around a really, really good human being.

Did you always want to dance?

I did. I grew up in a huge family in Ahmedabad. Every night, dozens of relatives would come and visit us. And it was a habit of mine to jump on the table, demand everybody's attention and do some little dance. So it started from very early on!

I can't really remember a precise moment when I decided it would be dance and nothing else. But I cannot remember a time when I was not dancing. I started with Bharatnatyam but quickly switched to Kathak, which in retrospect suited me much more. It is more exuberant, and has more open-ended structures and sentences.

I felt I wanted to communicate in a movement-based medium, which had movement of body, mind and soul. Dancing gives me immense satisfaction, and a sense of well-being; it gives me a high. This high doesn't always happen of course, and there is so much work going on before to enable it. But when it does happen, it is such a wonderful feeling, a sudden moment when all senses are fully alive, fully in synch.

So dance has been your medium to explore life?

Sometimes I see dancers doing the same thing for thirty years and I cannot quite comprehend it. I like to try and explore within and outside of my body, through the medium of dance. And I am also able to do so because I was lucky enough to have two very different gurus, who gave me the tools for it. Kumudini Lakhia had this amazing ability to see a dancer and the space around him or her. It gave you a perspective in terms of you and all you can explore outside of yourself. Whereas Birju Maharaj had a completely different way of looking at it, from the inner self to the rest of the body. This helps exploring within one's body, no matter if it is within a two feet dancing area.

I love it - this constant juggling of inside outside, together or not, exploring ways, trying not to interpret things but to transform them in a different language which is dance. That really excites me. Sometimes it falls flat on its face, sometimes it does well. It depends on so many things - and it also very much depends on who is watching.

Precisely, what about that alchemy with the audience?

I need to communicate. So I need to communicate with an audience, I need to communicate through dance that joy, that wonder, that feeling of abandonment to x, y or z. And when that communication happens, there is a feedback, like water gushing back into a river. It doesn't always happen of course. Ego can block you. Very often I see it – when I dance and think, "oh, I am doing well, I am dancing well", it immediately cuts something; "I am me" - so it cuts the flow. And the next thing I know I somehow trip and get a wake-up call. But if it is possible to transform something in somebody's mind, if someone goes home with a beautiful image, a thought, a feeling somehow relevant in their lives (and not just seeing it as entertainment), then it gives me a sense of fulfillment.

I do not like to explain too much. I prefer to leave some things open ended, letting people take it back with their energies, their experiences.

But you can't ever know if those moments of high and ecstasy will come, can you?

If you look for it, you will never get it. It happened to me so often: I would perform, looking for that moment and it would never come. And sometimes, it just comes!

If you are not religious, what do the word God or divine mean to you?

I ask myself if I am an atheist and would trust science only. Logically it could make sense. But yet something makes me believe, because I did feel it when I sat with Krishnamurti, I feel it when my son laughs, I have this totally beautiful feeling of love. There has to be something. It can't be a chemical reaction only. It's a wonder, this immense feeling of love. I ask myself if it is god, nature, beauty. What is it...

Krishnamurti said it very beautifully, when you stop seeking, it reveals itself. So I can't really tell you in words. God never arises in me as a figurehead. It is some goodness maybe.

When looking at your life and the way it unfolded, it is all random, or are there events that seem to be part of a larger order, a larger orchestration?

I wouldn't say it is only randomness. Maybe there is a kind of goodness, a kind of energy that guides or helps us but eventually it depends on us, on the energy we project.

But I never wanted to know if it is karmic, or destined, or preordained...

There is no such thing as destiny for you?

I do not want to think about it that way. I want to enjoy the moment as much as possible, no matter if it is actually preordained or not.

At times of real difficulty, where do you find your anchor, your energy?

I am not a quiet person. But when something challenging happens, I like to be quiet and some creative input comes from being silent, on my own. My very close family is also a great support.

If there were such a thing as God and you could ask one question, what would you ask?

When you created it all, did You have the same sense of wonder as we do?

If there were such a thing as reincarnation, what would you choose for the next round?

Anything... I have no interest in reincarnation though. I don't know if I believe in it or not. It is a question mark. Just as god is a question mark.

What is your idea of happiness?

It is a constant struggle to know and find what happiness would really be. There is a difference between the idea of happiness and what happiness really is. You may think that something should give you happiness, or that you should feel a certain way in certain circumstances. And then it absolutely doesn't happen!

What is contentment then?

Sometimes I question contentment. In an artistic field, if you are content, you don't grow. Yet, if you are not content, you are bitter. The dissatisfaction is actually there because you are looking for the end result. If we were only looking for satisfaction in the process of creating a piece, then we would be content. And the result is not in our hands in any case as it depends on so many other factors. But still, how often can we detach from the end result...