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Bharatanatyam Dancer and Choreographer

'You need a sense of beauty to validate your life and feel that it is worth living'

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Malavika Sarukkai is a Bharatanatyam dancer and choreographer.

What does spirituality mean to you?

Moments of forgetting the "I", of seeing the bigger picture, a sense of merging. The "I" is definitely displaced in that moment, it is not the center of gravity anymore.

That happens mostly through dancing?

No, it can happen in so many ways. Looking at a sunrise, gazing at the stars.

What about the idea of having a particular purpose in life?

Sometimes we discover that purpose along the journey of life. You can't plan certain things then they start happening and falling into place, without being generated by your own design. So in that sense it feels like a certain destiny unravels.

When I think of where I was when I took up dancing, and where I am now, when I think of all the things I went through, all the obstacles I encountered and had to remove, it is impossible for me to have controlled it all.

So are things preordained?

They may be, but of course we can't just sit back and wait for things to happen. One has to be alert to one's life's twists and turns. If there is a calling, even if the faintest of callings in the distance, we must follow it. It will lead us somewhere. It leads to deeper fulfillment.

When did you first hear your calling?

I guess when I was sixteen or so. I had grown up in Bombay and begun dancing there, introduced to it by my mother, who herself had studied dance. She was and still is a great pillar of strength and support. Then the family shifted back South. I was in Chennai, wondering what I would do with my life. I started training and was very fortunate to find very wonderful gurus, who had time for me.

Yet, I could not embrace dance full time. Even my mother was not keen given all the uncertainties attached to it. So I joined college. I spent a year and a day there. Then I realized that the only thing I liked when attending it, were the trees. And I decided I should quit. I felt I had to dance. I told my mother who said, "if you love it, you must dance!"

It was not an articulate decision, a formal thought or desire. It was a very spontaneous and deep feeling.

It also was a hugely reckless decision because nothing was guaranteed. Nothing, zero. You have no bank balance. You don't know where your future is. Everything is uncertain. As an artist you choose to live on the brink all the time. But somehow it was like an inner voice telling me I had to do it.

I was going through an extremely difficult and disturbing personal time, psychologically. And I had found in dance a great sanctuary where I could heal, a sanctuary that was keeping me embraced, like a womb of space, a sanctuary that no one could take away from me.

So I began practicing non stop. I fell out of everything, I became a recluse. For years, I moved out of any kind of socializing, doing my own thing.

Then breaks came, people saw me and became supportive of my work, bit by bit by bit.

There are so many ups and downs as a dancer. It is not one soaring high. Life is so full of questions, and doubts. But what saw me through was the sheer beauty of dance. The beauty I could feel, sense, express. Just that exhilaration of dancing. Even when the tough times came.

I actually didn't have any place to practice until eighteen years ago. I used to practice on the terrace, before people would come and dry their clothes. This of course ruined my feet because of the hard cement. But it never dampened my spirits. And I had that one person to share it all with, my mother. She always was very stimulating. She had studied philosophy. And it is so important. You cannot draw inspiration from the superficial.

With dance, you experience and feel everything in the moment. How does one make something move?

How does one bring life into a movement? How do you take a gesture, which is just a gesture of your hand, and make it alive, with meaning? You cannot just think it, you have to do something. Like putting breath into every moment. Movement is only external. But what defines it is the thought that moves it. Let's say I do a water movement, I then think of a very quiet flow, of images of water, of a journey, and then I try to sense that image through my whole being, to spread it from head to toe. It's mindfulness.

All of this generates a different energy in space. That I ensure. It is not about taking the arm through space only. It is about doing something to space. Space is part of dance. It is an active part of dance. It has its own qualities and the dancer energizes that space. Every movement is an interaction through the silence of space.

Then the question is how do you take that and make it fresh every time. That is where it cleanses you. Because each time, you have to be born again in that feeling.

Once you discover the beauty of being born again, you never want to have imitative art. You realize the beauty of that freshness, of the first time.

It has a lot to do with the mind, how the mind plays out, and with this mind-body balance. The mind intelligence and the body intelligence have a very fine balance, which can lead you to moments of ecstasy, almost beyond the mind. When the "I" does not project itself.

So how does one empty oneself? Before performances I cannot talk too much or see people. A certain inner focusing happens. Besides, if you have really worked on your body and you have fine-tuned it to a high degree like an instrument, it is prepared. Finally, if you have worked on your mind to make sure it is quiet, then you feel you have tried to empty yourself. The whole purpose is to become empty for that moment of creation. If you don't empty, how can you feel? If I go with my mind fully cluttered, then there is no space for art.

Very often people in those spaces of creation mention being a conduit for something beyond them?

Of course, absolutely! Being a vessel, being the container. At that moment you feel there is this other energy going through you. If you were your ordinary self, where would the magic be, where is art, where is transcendence, where is the moment of letting go, of losing oneself and the "I"? Art takes you to that place.

Moving people through it, is that part of your life purpose?

That is like completing a circuit. The public sends it back to me and I take it forward. Reaching out, touching people at the core is certainly the magic that happens.

So the alchemy of what you go through is very different in front of an audience, or alone in a temple, in your studio or in nature?

Dancing can be complete in itself, without anyone around. I could dance alone in my studio and feel completely complete. If an audience is there, they bring in their own energy, so it is indeed a different alchemy.

Also, you have to clear the energy of the hall you dance in, you have to cleanse and quieten the place. You have to make it conducive to the birth of dance. Which takes energy. Whereas in a temple for instance, that layer of work is not needed. I don't have to create that energy around me. It already is there.

If I have an audience, I can for sure sense them. I know if they are with me, if they are getting distracted. And after a performance, I am puzzled when people share what they saw. There is

somehow a sense of disjointedness – is it me, is it through me that all of this happened? Because when I dance, I am like in an altered state of consciousness, in a different zone. Then I stop, come back to this reality, and have to connect with what people say they saw and felt.

I can see it happening more and more actually. I feel a high-intensity sharpness. And that's why perhaps I affect diverse audiences as much as I do. And it really humbles me, because when you touch such a moment of ecstasy, you know you are in presence of greatness, the grand, the beyond.

What about the idea of God?

The idea of a divine presence is very much there. But I do not find it only in godly figures. When a seed is being planted and a new life bursts through, it is the miracle of birth. Every time I dance it, my whole body is in joyful wonder. Imagine, it is happening all the time around us. What is this creation, this order? What is this grander design? It just leaves me speechless. And it becomes sacred. Movements are also about the sacred. Taking my arms through space. The silence of it, the inner silence I feel, the complete balance, order, harmony, is sacred. It can be an abstract movement as well. It does not only happen if I am dancing our myths and legends. It depends on what it does to you within. That is where the sacred is. It is not so much on the outside, it is inside. A falling leaf can be sacred. You might see the greatest beauty in that moment.

When looking at this grand order, how do you comprehend suffering?

Those are disjuncts and fractures that create the anguish one feels. Because life is also very much about that other side. We create this side of beauty to offset that side of terror, and violence. You need a sense of beauty in your life to validate your life and feel that it is worth living.

When you see so much violence, as an artist you respond to it. You create an experience where one can reflect on it. The classical arts are all stylized but still if you create that intensity, the audience and you can reflect on it. Death, violence and terror are so much part of one's life. Creating beauty is not an escape, but a validation that it is also worth being here.

When we obey our calling, does it also come with sacrifices?

Absolutely. You have to give up many things. I don't get a fantastic salary, I have to live in a modest way, I've often had to give up on friends and social life. Sometimes you wish you could also have done a bit of something else. But that what life is about, you take some, you give up some, you have a few regrets. Also, sometimes sacrifices are not seen as sacrifices, because what you are doing is so purposeful, you have so much happiness that you don't realize it. Years and years I danced in very little spaces, with hardly any rehearsal room. I wasn't doing many concerts, I was leading a very simple life. My life is much more complicated now. I do not have an agent or something like that. There is so much work to do. Artists here are completely on their own. You have to manage everything. Then you just dip into this world of the sanctuary. And it keeps you going for some time.

Now I feel I want to share this experience of dancing with everyone. Because there is so much meaning and inner beauty that people find in art. If I am able to express it, I am so happy. Of course as one gets older, you have those aches and pains but your body is your instrument, your brush.

Isn't it a huge source of anxiety?

It absolutely is. That is a trouble area.

Even the kind of floor we dance damages the spine, the knees. All that comes with it.

If you could ask God one question, what would it be?

Why do our lives have so much pain and beauty? Why are we confronted with both?

If there were such a thing as rebirth, what would you choose?

I believe in continuity. The atma is just in a temporary pot. When the pot breaks it becomes free, till it gets encased once more. So I would just like to still be on my spiritual quest, however it would happen.

What is your idea of happiness?

The greatest happiness I found are those moments of ecstasy when I dance. I cannot define any other happiness that would come anywhere near it.

Once you have touched such moments of high and pure ecstasy, do you keep trying to re-create and touch the same highs?

Those are just moments you get to. They just happen and are free of any bind. There is no path to get there. You cannot look back and say I have reached here from that point, walking that trail. That is why it is so ecstatic. It just happens. In freedom. So it can't ever be about trying to re-create the same moment of ecstasy. It is about touching ecstasy, wherever it is, wherever it is meant to come. There is no repetition. Because in repetition there is thought. And as long as there is thought and structure, you are still bound.