

EMOTIONS, DANCE AND HUMAN FITNESS

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Abstract

Indian Classical Dances and their ancient history clearly signify that from the very beginning these dances focus at the betterment of health of dancers. Classical Dancers are not just performing artists; their bodies are the vehicle through which the art is created. In many cases they are compared with yogis performing physical and mental exercise while dancing. Beyond the gamut of pure entertainment, the aim of all artists is to realize the Ultimate Reality and experience liberation and growth as a human, through the magnificence of art and artistic delight. Hence, the necessity of having an exemplary mental and physical health is the main aim of every adept performer. Dance extracts a lot more from the artist viz. confidence, body control, discipline, emotional stability and finally culminates into offering spiritual enlightenment in return. Indian Classical Dance is an impulse, but the art of dance is that impulse channelized by the artist which creates a metamorphosis of an intense expressive art which provides artistic delight to the spectators (Rasika). The energy in the dance transcends through the dancer and extends to her audience who gets involved in her journey and feel the energy through perfect synergy in their own nerves while seated and watching the performance – Rasaasvaada. Thus, it is extremely important for the dancer to know the systems of the body and the basic functions of them all and further maintain a well-balanced emotional and mental quotient.

The physical demands being placed on dancers today has made their physiology, physical, mental and emotional fitness just as important as daily practice in dance. However, dancers' muscular strength and bone and joint integrity seem to suffer as a result of the 'dance-only' selection and training system.

Every dancer and dancers' bodies are different from one another and one has to try various multi-disciplinary training and aiding tools to decipher a lifestyle works for her/him subjectively. Hence, it becomes extremely important to fuse together the available resources with the due progress of science and the shastras propounded by Bharata in his magnum opus Naatyashastra for overall and holistic wellbeing of every dancer, whether in the capacity of a dance teacher or a dance performer to safeguard her own art.

Key words: dance, fitness, emotions, naatyashastra, health, lifestyle, wellness

The term 'wellness' is a positive affirmation of an evolving process which is constant, disciplined and determined primarily aimed at achieving one's full capacity. It is a holistic encompassing lifestyle of one's own mental and spiritual well-being, and upliftment of the environment. Thus, in order to sustain improved quality of survival wellness is key irrespective of age, gender or occupation. In day to day life every living being directly or indirectly emotes, acts and reacts as per his/her well-being. Thus, wellness is indispensable for reducing stress levels, possibility of ailment and mainly to ensure a 'positive vibe' in life. It is important to pay attention to self-care consisting of an all-encompassing regime including fitness, nutrition, healthcare, rest and relaxation, stress reduction and the development of inner resources in order to achieve maximum potential making the individual adept to perform under all circumstances.

We experience a variety of emotions which are mostly temporary in nature, at the same time, they have the potential to considerably impact our biochemistry and actions. Hormones control several physiological reactions in the human body including energy uptake, production and degeneration of muscles and maintaining the appropriate attitude to name a few. Emotions arise from the stimulation in the nervous system due to the chemical reactions which occur in the brain and it is through the neurotransmitters that the messages are passed to the entire body. Thus, hormones and chemicals help in keeping the body in normal action.

Movement, thus, is a special feature of human life which helps in communicating the emotions and the state of mind with artistic skill.

"Man is not always inhibited about his use of movement. He can and does use movement as a very obvious and positive way of expressing his emotions. Indeed some maintain that true expression begins where language ends and a profound emotional experience is often beyond words. Without movement there would be no outlet for any of the experiences which man undergoes. The arts mirror these experiences and some of the arts use movement in a consciously expressive way... The dancer strives for understanding and control of his body since his only means of expression and communication is his movement. The transient nature of dance is such

that dancers need constantly to broaden and deepen their own movement experience. They need technique to help them master their own body and the ideal technique is one of overall awareness and not a series of exercises. Dancers should consistently return to the ultimate source material for dance which is movement; movement that is observed, enjoyed for its own sake or used in situations other than dance in order to create beauty, both for the performer and spectator and contribute to appreciation of dance as an expressive creative medium.” (Thronton.S,1971.p 40-41).

As dance consists of integrating not only the physical, emotional and physiological levels of a human being alongwith creating a scope for emoting through abhinaya, dance is an apt therapy to increase intellect and sharpen one’s mind. Abhinaya generates awareness of morality and wellness by showcasing the intended mode of conduct through dance and relaxes the mind. Thus, dance is considered as one of the highest form of adoration of the celestial. Expressions are a major component of emotions. As per the theories propounded by Bharata in his magnum opus - the Naatyashastra;

“lalitairhastasañcārīstathā mṛdvaṅgaceṣṭitaiḥ abhineyastu nātyaiñai rasabhāvasamanvitaiḥ ”
(Gosh.M,1951,p.24.73)

The experts on naatyā are to act (a particular role) with graceful movements of hand, soft or smooth motions of limbs fully conveying the sentiments and emotional states.

The word ‘abhinaya’ etymologically means the ‘root ni’ - to carry with, and the preposition ‘abhi’ - towards, thus, together it means - that which carries the meaning (by the artist) to the audience. The pinnacle of the Naatyashastra lies in the concept wherein - there is nothing to communicate if it is not ‘relishable’ - this is the famous concept of ‘Rasa Sutra’. The emotions must be provoked in the minds of the audience for them to relish it. The performer must create and maintain the right proportion and harmonious expression of these construction factors for creating an emotion that will lead to aesthetic delight in his spectator. This is further compared to culinary skills stating that just as well mixed and well cooked food brings joy of perfect taste to a food enthusiast who relishes the dish, in the same manner, the audience enjoys the taste of rasa which is assorted in the right manner - this is the fundamental truth which is broadly applicable to all Indian Arts. Indian Classical Dance is an impulse, but the art of dance is that impulse channelized by the artist which transforms the intense expressive art providing artistic delight to the ‘Rasikas.’ The energy in the dance transmits from the dancer and extends to her audience who gets involved in her journey and feel the same energy through perfect synergy in their own nerves while they are viewing the performance - ‘Rasaasvaada.’

Beyond the gamut of pure entertainment, the aim of all artists is to realize the Ultimate Reality and experience liberation and growth as a human, through the magnificence of art and artistic delight. Dance aids in helping and improving concentration, calm down the individual’s mind, improve focus and helps in creating better body image by improving self-esteem and confidence. Classical Dancers are not just performing artists; their bodies are the vehicle through which the art is created. Indian Classical Dances and their ancient history clearly signify that from the very beginning these dances focused at the betterment of health of dancers. In many cases they are compared with yogis performing physical and mental exercise both while performing. But at the same time, dance extracts a lot more from the artist viz. confidence, body control, discipline, emotional stability and finally culminates into offering spiritual enlightenment in return.

Learning any dance movement or skilled art is accomplished at the conscious level of a learner, but the subconscious mind takes over once the artist has learnt the art. Most of the times there comes a point wherein the mental strength of the human mind takes over the body especially at a challenging point, which when surpassed, the artist reaches the highest point of eternal bliss.

“The link between mind and body is called ‘manas’. Manas connects mental and physical phenomena. It helps us to understand internal body which plays a major role in dance. It is through body that a dancer dances. Manas resides and moves in the internal body. Hence, tracing the movements of manas is essential for the construction of accurate grammar of dance. It resolves the mind, body problem.” (Nimbkar. S and Singh. N, 2014, P 128)

Dance movement is not just an external body movement but an internal one as well. It is both physical and mental. It is a physical phenomenon comprising of movement in both time and space. The emoting and showcasing of one’s thoughts require the body which in turn utilizes the space around. Much of what makes a dancer “superior” to another is the ability to express and emote in performance. Abhinaya is an integral part of all performances. Biomechanics of an individual’s body and the artistry in execution of the act, influence each other closely and are interdependent on each other. Muscle imbalances, unsolved injuries, and poor neural firing patterns (synergistic dominances, compensatory patterns, etc) affect the vehicle of expression (the body). A body with alignment issues will not be able to express consistently. Dance is about relaxation and contraction of muscles over and over, alongwith transmitting the feelings of the lyrics being sung and through emoted actions transmitting the same towards the audience. If one is unable to “relax” then it is not possible to “contract” either. Lack of confidence, feeling shy, anxious and stressed, could be a reason of the inability of a dancer due to her own ignorance in finding time to calm the muscles or the ignorance to the technique of being in the state of relaxation. Thus, such a dancer comes across as monotonous, lacking expression and the technical development reaches a plateau. Excess tension also creates a situation prone to injury. The mental condition such as stress, tension (either in personal life or specifically related to dance for example fear of

forgetting the dance piece, fear to deliver to the maximum, low motivation, poor mental stability etc) results in the dancer not breathing properly causing stiffness in the body. Thus, it is essential to maintain a balance in both states, physical and mental, to achieve optimum performing capability.

Dancers are currently performing and training under unimaginable pressures! And with those higher expectations excessive stress on excessive mobility, harder and faster dancing comes increased risk of injury and emotional strain. For many young dancers, the only sources of information and help are their dance teachers, who may not be trained in dance science, and their favourite social media influencers who need not always be technically sound to advice. A classical dancer's body is his or her livelihood, and injury can mean lost wages or even the end of a career. A dancer has been trained to view the body as his or her tool of expression. The greatest challenge may be communicating the importance of rest and overuse of body leading to untoward injuries. Concepts such as 'more is better' and 'work through the pain' are ingrained into dancers' psyches over years of training. It is often extremely difficult for dancers to accept their injuries. There is substantial evidence that some classical dancers have difficulty with their personal lives and with their lives as performers. Specifically, a consistent emphasis on performance-orientation has been linked to the development of potentially maladaptive dispositions. The setting of externalized goals that may lead to self-destructive behaviours such as eating disorders, depression, maladaptive perfectionism, and problems with career transitions. Thus, it gets extremely important to promote their sense of empowerment, self-development, and self-actualization as individuals and as artistic performers.

Every dancer and dancers' body are different from one another and one must try various multi-disciplinary training and aiding tools to decipher a lifestyle that works for her/him subjectively. The physical demands being placed on dancers today has made their physiology, physical, mental and emotional fitness just as important as daily practice in dance. Thus, it is extremely important for the dancer to know the systems of the body and the basic functions of them all and further maintain a well-balanced emotional and mental quotient in order to propel the art through them without it being affected by the artist's personal life whether in the capacity of a dance teacher or a dance performer in order to safeguard her own art. However, dancers' muscular strength and bone and joint integrity seem to suffer as a result of the 'dance-only' selection and training system. Any type of mental or emotional negligence may cause injury to the dancer, but at the same time, calculated nutrition intake and an overall fitness lifestyle focusing on the emotional, mental and behavioural patterns can make a long and glorious future for the dancer and strengthen the unbreakable bond with the artist and the art. The breathing pattern, flexibility, balanced nutrition, balance, mental stability and muscular control are very important in these regards.

For a dancer, to continue his/her profession, it is of utmost importance that he/she needs to maintain optimum fitness levels. Fitness is defined as the ability of a person to live a healthy and well-balanced life. It involves physical, social as well as emotional aspects of life. Fitness is required to sustain the physical stress on the body. It consists of – muscular strength, muscular endurance, cardio-respiratory endurance, flexibility, emotional balance, mental health and stability and neuromuscular skill which when worked upon all together, enhance the fluidity of the dance movements. Dancers have a unique blend of skill along with athleticism thus making us stand on par with the highest trained sportsmen in terms of fitness. Strengthening exercises improve the strength and endurance of the artist. Cardio exercises like jogging or swimming, help in enhancing stamina. Nutrition plans and sufficient hydration play the most important role in maintaining optimum fitness levels. Imbibing positive and corrective affirmations and positive reinforcement solutions such as Reiki, Yoga and Meditation help in nurturing the creative ability of the artist and encourage a state of mind to improvise, improve and hone the skills of the art. Dance type specific exercises, movements, technique, nutrition plan and training is mandatory to continue dancing gracefully and healthily for a lifetime.

According to the World Health Organization, 'Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.' This definition goes beyond the traditional view of health, which for many years was perceived as merely the absence of disease. However, placing illness (or injury) on one side of a line and health on the other is still a common practice. There is a co-relation between physical fitness and emotional fitness due to the hormones which are secreted which manoeuvre the bodily reactions. For example a hormone called endorphin is secreted as a result of stress, pain or fear are neurotransmitters which play a key role in the function of the central nervous system and can either trigger or suppress the messages passed by the neurons. They are mainly responsible for blocking pain and controlling emotion and cause the feeling of pleasure. This 'feel good' hormone when balanced adequately in the brain is crucial for stable human emotions. The levels can be modified through a fitness regime, meditation, positive reinforcement and a healthy and nutritious food plan. There is an increase in the production of endorphins during and post an exercise/activity which are released further in the body. This hormone helps the body cope with the pain and in effect provide happiness. When any individual maintains such a lifestyle the emotions of such a person are in check due to the secretion of happy hormones. In case of dancers, when regular workouts and lifestyle modulations are made in order to promote a fitter daily program to aid the dancing capabilities, the same feature improving conditions as the dancer is in the happy zone due to following such self-care systems.

Wellness programs may include screening protocols, educating the dancer -student with concepts such as anatomy, nutrition, psychological care and concern, mental health workshops in the hope to address a fuller scope of dancer's health. The reason why most dancers are plagued by chronic aches, pains and illnesses on the one hand, and give dissatisfactory performances on the other hand is due to lack of functional movement therapy, emotional and mental aid and corrections. Professional help to an artist is extremely important to improve the standards of performing and to help the dancer to increase the longevity of the professional life. Recommendations should be made to prevent or reverse overtraining by various scientific methods such as monitoring dance quality versus quantity, diet of the artist, hydration, rest, emotional quotient, mental stability and sleep conditions. The primary aim for a supplementary dance fitness class is for the structure and content of the class to be responsive to curriculum needs. Recovery techniques must become a part of the overall training programs, alternating between work and rest. The dancers' heart rates and/or perceptions of how hard they feel they are working (rate of perceived exertion) or their emotional levels while performing or the aftereffects of the performances or dance class on their mental levels can be monitored regularly. As dance institutes, the goal should be to help dancers see a 360-degree view of health - dance medicine researchers, psychiatrists, nutritionists, physical fitness advisors and therapists. Sometimes to continue without losing the drive to persuade dancing it is necessary to rearrange perspective. Taking time out daily and focusing on other allied pathways which would indirectly boost the 'dance' would further stimulate different parts of the dancer's creative brain and staying positive mind set and stay motivated. A lack of motivation comes from feelings of isolation, competition, jealousy in dance classes, hence, holistic fitness goals can be set by the dance group as a whole aiding team spirit and improving self-image. Dance for wellness is a very popular concept all over the world but including 'wellness for dance' within the ambit of typical classical dance education programs will help in achieving a better 'life' for dancers.

"We have to do all that an athlete has to do - and then we have to smile!" - Fit to Dance

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