

# DANCE AS *DHARMIC* EXERCISE: THE SPIRITUAL BENEFITS OF CLASSICAL DANCE

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**Abstract:** Classical dance has gradually lost its essence as a spiritual discipline due to the influence of modern cultural trends that emphasize bodily pleasures and entertainment-oriented aesthetics. This article seeks to reclaim dance as a *Dharmic* discipline, positioning it as a vital practice for cultivating inner peace and contributing to social transformation. The author highlights the spiritual healing potential of classical dance, viewing it not merely as a performative or entertaining art, but as a sacred expression of life itself. The study critiques the reduction of dance to stage performance or sensual display, and instead proposes it as an invitation for individuals to engage in a deeper, participatory spiritual exercise. While acknowledging dance as a visible expression of life, the article also cautions against its misdirection when reduced to mere physical movements aimed at pleasure. Finally, the author also highlights the transformative power of dance—its ability to serve as a medium for meaningful communication and as a catalyst for social harmony and renewal.

**Keywords:** *Dharmic Exercise, Dharma, Dance, Spiritual Benefits.*

## 1. Introduction

How can society reclaim and affirm dance as a religious and spiritual practice? Does modern dance retain the capacity to meaningfully connect with the sacred? And how can classical dance be re-understood as a form of devotion? These questions are central to this inquiry, which approaches dance not merely as performance or entertainment but as a profound expression of

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spirituality and inner vitality. In a cross-cultural context, dance has long held significance as a spiritual discipline. Yet in many modern societies, it is often viewed through a distorted lens—reduced to a form of sensual entertainment or even stigmatized as taboo and disconnected from the moral fabric of society (Li, 1).

This reductionist view has led to the erosion of dance's spiritual and aesthetic value. Once revered as an artistic and devotional expression, dance in many modern cultures has lost its sacred charm, redefined primarily as a medium for visual pleasure. Historically, however, this was not always the case. Dancers once expressed love and connection not through physical contact, but through symbolic gestures that conveyed deep emotional and spiritual bonds—free from vulgarity and eroticism (Gerardus van der Leeuw, 21).

In the Indian context, classical dance traditions such as Bharatanatyam and Odissi have long been regarded as sacred practices rooted in ritual, healing, and devotion. Yet colonialism deeply disrupted this cultural view. Sutapa Chaudhuri (2014) notes that during British rule, classical dance was marginalized and associated with immorality, particularly through its misidentification with prostitution. Consequently, many educated Indian families began to prohibit their daughters from participating in dance, viewing it as socially shameful. Dance became taboo. It was only through the reformative efforts of visionaries like Rabindranath Tagore—a poet, philosopher, and artist—that dance was reintegrated into the cultural and spiritual life of India. Tagore's advocacy helped restore dance as a respectable and meaningful practice, particularly among educated women, repositioning it within India's rich artistic and cultural heritage (Chaudhuri, 224–225).

To reclaim the original charm and social relevance of dance, it must be reoriented toward its roots—as a practice imbued with aesthetic beauty and moral purpose. Often misperceived as mere performance, dance in its classical form actually serves as an invitation to participate in deeper processes of teaching and learning, self-discipline, and spiritual development. Despite this, resistance persists—particularly in the supposed opposition

between religion and dance. Why does such enmity exist?

Gerardus van der Leeuw (2006) offers insight by framing religious dance as a natural, healthy mode of expressing the sacred and the vitality of life (56). However, when dance loses its expressive depth and is reduced to physical movements aimed at pleasure, it is stripped of its religious and moral resonance. Such misdirection leads to misunderstanding and moral resistance. Yet dance, when rightly understood, is a powerful medium of communication—capable of conveying messages that inspire social change and foster harmony. It becomes a sacred exchange of energies and meanings that bridge the personal and the communal, the aesthetic and the ethical.

The phrase ‘*Dharmic* exercise’ refers to an activity rooted in *dharma*, meaning moral duty, righteousness, or the path of truth and harmony. It is not merely a physical or artistic act but one that aligns with ethical principles, spiritual values, and inner discipline. A *Dharmic* exercise aims to nurture both the individual and society by fostering inner growth, balance, and justice. In such practices—like classical dance, meditation or service—there is an intentional pursuit of spiritual meaning and collective well-being. Thus, a *Dharmic* exercise transcends personal gratification and becomes a sacred offering that contributes to the greater good.

In light of these reflections, this paper approaches classical Indian dance as a *Dharmic* spiritual exercise. It argues that classical dance is not only an artistic expression but also a profound vehicle for devotion, inner transformation, and societal renewal. Rooted in aesthetic philosophy and spiritual tradition, this study aims to explore how dance can be reimagined and reclaimed as a religious discipline—one that offers tangible spiritual benefits and contributes to the healing and harmony of the individual and society alike

## **2. Dance and Religion in Diversity: A *Dharmic* Exercise**

Dance and religion, far from being opposing forces, are deeply interconnected, diverse and harmoniously intertwined. According to Gerardus van der Leeuw, there exists no inherent conflict between art and religion (Leeuw, 11). Rather, dance often

serves as a hallmark of cultural and spiritual traditions, reflecting profound expressions of the sacred (Gill, 193). Historically, dance has been honored not merely as a performing art but as a sacred ritual embedded in the spiritual life of communities. In ancient China, for instance, dance was closely tied to ritual and song, often used in acts of divination and communication with the divine (Jingfang, 86–87). Chinese dance heritage includes a broad spectrum—from religious and folk dances to theatrical performances—many of which have informed the aesthetic of modern Chinese dance (Wilcox, 65, 68).

Given this rich background, we may ask: how do spectators today perceive dance—as mere cultural performance or as a vehicle for social transformation? And how does dance, as a *Dharmic* practice—the Way and the Truth—communicate meaning through its non-verbal gestures and movements? In many traditional societies, dance was not simply an act of entertainment, but a sacred medium that connected the performer and the community to the divine. The spiritual essence of dance transcends cultural boundaries, making it a *Dharmic* exercise—an embodied way of expressing deeper truths and values. Rather than being limited to specific disciplines or rituals, dance has historically functioned across civilizations as a “supreme expression of worship” (Herskovits, 41). For example, in Jewish tradition, music and dance played a central role in their collective spiritual life. The dance of Miriam, sister of Moses, is a powerful symbol of liberation, celebrating deliverance from oppression. Rabbinic literature, especially in the Mishnah, portrays dance as both ritual and redemption, affirming its role in spiritual expression (Berger et al., 476). In both Judaism and Christianity, dance has long been associated with religious festivals and ceremonial gatherings, expressing joy, sorrow and divine communion through the body (Carlson, 27).

Similar connections exist in the Indian and Western traditions. Bansat-Boudon (311) notes the close association of dance practices with rituals in both traditions. The Indian classical dance tradition is particularly rich, comprising the principal forms like—*Bharatanatyam*, *Kuchipudi*, *Kathakali*, *Mohiniyattam*, etc (Madhavan

et al., 99). These forms are not merely artistic expressions but spiritual disciplines, deeply rooted in devotional practices and metaphysical expressions. However, the spiritual dimension of dance faces challenges in contemporary contexts. Dance is now entangled with issues of gender identity, commercialization and the dilution of its ritual significance. Yet, rather than isolating the dancer, true *Dharmic* practice invites both performer and audience into a shared spiritual and cultural journey – a participatory act of transformation.

Indian classical dance is increasingly recognized for its therapeutic and holistic benefits. Studies show its positive impact on emotional well-being, stress reduction, healing and even as a form of psychotherapeutic engagement (Srivastava et al., 29). But the implications extend further. As Risner (251) observes, dance as a *Dharmic* exercise can also address broader social dimensions such as economic, political and cultural instability – affirming its potential for holistic healing. That is to say, dance as a *Dharmic* exercise transcends religious ritual alone. It becomes an embodied form of duty (*dharma*), shaping ethical living and social well-being. For the discerning individual, dance is not merely an art or a belief system – it is a law of life that, when followed with sincerity and reverence, contributes to the flourishing of both individuals and communities.

### 3. Gender, Tradition and the *Dharmic* Legacy of Indian Classical Dance

India holds an unparalleled position in the global history of classical and folk dance, contributing richly to the spiritual, cultural and aesthetic dimensions of this art form. Studies highlight that the state of Kerala alone is home to over 200 recognized folk and tribal dance traditions. The symbiotic nature of Indian dance is expressed through three core techniques: hand gestures (*mudras*) used for non-verbal communication; facial expressions and coordinated movements of the eyes, neck and head; and, finally, an all-encompassing pattern of structured bodily movements that form the choreography of performance (Madhavan et al., 99–100). Together, these techniques serve as a

powerful non-verbal language, central to the process of meaning-making in Indian classical dance. M. Caterina Mortillaro (2019) traces the spiritual lineage of Indian dance to the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, regarded as the fifth *Veda*, in which the god *Brahma* imparted dance to all castes—including the *Shudras* (formerly considered untouchables)—thus framing dance as both an educative and egalitarian spiritual practice. In the Hindu tradition, classical dance is believed to possess purificatory power capable of restoring cosmic balance and dispelling evil (107). Furthermore, female temple dancers, known as *devadāsīs* (Servants of God), were once revered for their ritual roles in invoking prosperity and fertility. However, under colonial British rule, these practices were misinterpreted by western missionaries, who viewed them through a moralistic and racialized lens, conflating sacred performance with prostitution (108–109). These misjudgments reflect broader colonial prejudices that dismissed Indian ritual traditions as pagan or barbaric. The reclamation of classical dance as a respected spiritual and artistic form was significantly advanced by Rukmini Devi, a Brahmin woman who played a pioneering role in re-establishing dance as a dignified cultural practice. She redefined its aesthetic by removing overtly sensual elements and re-infusing it with spiritual and philosophical meaning (109).

Nevertheless, an important question arises: is classical dance restricted to female participation, and how can traditional views of masculinity in dance be re-evaluated? In some cultural contexts, dance continues to be gendered as a feminine pursuit. Challenging this perception, Doug Risner (2023) critiques western hegemonic assumptions that marginalize male dancers and non-heteronormative expressions in dance education. He argues that dance can serve as a transformative space for challenging dominant gender norms and opening pathways for all individuals—regardless of gender—to engage meaningfully in the arts (153–156). Thus, dance should not be reduced to a domain of female expression but must be seen as a shared cultural and spiritual activity in which both men and women contribute equally to personal and social well-being.

The evolution of gender roles in dance has been complex. As dance became more theatrical and separated from public rituals, gendered distinctions became more pronounced, and female performers gained greater visibility. However, in the Indian context, the trajectory of male and female roles in classical dance is nuanced and deeply embedded in sociohistorical dynamics, not merely anatomical or religious determinants (V. Subramaniam, 3). Jawaharlal Handoo (2006) further argues that while female dancers have often received attention for their beauty, attire and emotive gestures, classical dance is equally suited to male expression. What ultimately matters, he contends, is not the gender of the performer, but the context, intent and message of the artistic expression. Importantly, male *gurus* (teachers) have played foundational roles in preserving and transmitting these traditions, even though female dancers often occupy the performance spotlight (31–32). These observations make us believe that the sacred and artistic legacy of Indian classical dance transcends gender. While women's contributions have been vital, the participation of men is equally significant. Dance, as a *Dharmic* exercise, belongs to all who engage with it sincerely – as a path of inner discipline, cultural continuity and transformative social expression.

#### **4. Student–Teacher Relationship in Dance Education**

The teacher–student relationship in dance education holds profound importance, especially within the framework of Indian classical dance. In the *Kathak* tradition, this bond is encapsulated in the *guru–śiṣya* (*teacher–disciple*) system, which has historically emphasized reverence, dedication, and close, immersive learning (Chatterjea, 71). Traditionally, students lived with their teachers, offering greater respect to their *gurus* than even their own fathers (Meyer-Dinkgräfe, 166). To honor this tradition, dancers perform the *trikhaṇḍī praṇām* – a threefold salutation offered to God, Guru, and audience – upon entering the stage. With its roots tracing back to the second century CE, Indian classical dance is embedded in a deeply intellectual and spiritual context. However, the value placed on this teacher–student relationship has diminished in

modern contexts, often reduced to transactional training rather than transformative mentorship (Meyer-Dinkgräfe, 167). The *guru-śiṣya paramparā* is more than a teaching method—it is a holistic pedagogical and spiritual framework. Its effectiveness lies in mutual commitment and trust, where learning is guided not only by technique but by intuition, aesthetic sensibility, and philosophical reflection (Dasgupta, 3061–3065; Marathe & Wagani, 331–340). In modern dance education, it is worth asking whether contemporary adaptations retain the spiritual and pedagogical depth of this model or whether new educational structures risk severing this rich lineage

#### **4.1. The Spiritual-Transformative Dimensions of Dance**

Dance transcends mere physical movement; it is a transformative medium that bridges the human and the divine, enabling spiritual elevation and self-realization. Across traditions, dance serves as both artistic expression and sacred ritual (Sharma & Harmalkar, 533–534). Particularly in the Indian *Dharmic* tradition, dance associates with the body, mind and cosmos—embodying rhythm and discipline that cultivates inner harmony (Ibid, 535–536). This invites inquiry into whether dance should be universally understood as a spiritual practice or if its spiritual significance is culturally contingent. *Bharatanatyam*, one of India's most prominent classical forms, exemplifies the intricate relationship between movement and spiritual devotion. Its use of *mudrās* (hand gestures), *adavus* (footwork), and *abhinaya* (expressive facial movements) weaves mythology, devotion and storytelling into an embodied spiritual practice (Sarkar, 6–14). Historically rooted in temple rituals, *Bharatanatyam* was performed by *devadāsīs* as sacred offerings to deities (Sreelakshmi & Ganesh, 2). While modern performance contexts have shifted, the spiritual core remains embedded in the form's narrative and symbolic power (Ananya, 118–123).

Likewise, *Kathak*, another Indian classical form, evolved from temple traditions into a sophisticated art during Mughal patronage, blending Hindu and Islamic aesthetics (Sharma & Harmalkar, 537–541). This syncretism unfolds the adaptability of



dance as a spiritual practice across diverse contexts. Does Islamic influence dilute or enrich Kathak’s spiritual meaning? Arguably, it affirms the universal capacity of dance to serve as a conduit to the divine. In fact, a parallel tradition is found in *Sufi* whirling (performed by Turkey’s Mevlevi dervishes), a meditative practice symbolizing the soul’s journey toward divine unity. The continuous spinning represents spiritual transcendence and detachment from worldly distractions (Sreelakshmi & Ganesh, 3). A Persian Islamic Philosopher, Abu Hamid Muhammad ibn al-Ghazali (1058–1111 CE), supports this view in his *magnum opus* *Iḥyā’ ‘Ulūm al-Dīn*, asserting that if the joy leading to dance is praiseworthy, then the act of dancing that amplifies it, is likewise commendable (MacDonald, 105). These practices challenge the notion that dance must be confined to entertainment. In traditions like *Yoga* and *Tantra*, movement is integral to spiritual awakening. *Shiva* as *Natarāja*, the cosmic dancer, symbolizes the universe’s cyclical nature—creation, preservation and destruction—raising questions about whether this myth is symbolic or an active meditative influence on practitioners (Srinivasan & Aithal, 1–7).

#### 4.2. Dance Pedagogy and Philosophical Transmission

The preservation of classical dance is inseparable from the *guru-śiṣya paramparā*. The *guru*, as Aparajita Dasgupta notes, is not only a theoretical instructor but also a spiritual guide, nurturing artistic excellence and emotional depth (3058–3059). While some see this traditional system as rigid, scholars like Dalidowicz argue that within its structured imitation lies the space for creative reinterpretation (838). The *guru*’s role also extends to emotional and, at times, financial support (Dasgupta, 3060), prompting a comparison with contemporary methods that often prioritize technical output over holistic development. The question remains: does adherence to tradition inhibit innovation, or does it enable it through grounded continuity? Although the *Bhagavad Gītā* does not directly mention dance, its philosophical teachings resonate with dance as devotion. Krishna advises Arjuna to dedicate all actions to the divine (Gita 9.31, Mitchell, 118) and to act without attachment to outcomes (Gita 2.47, Ibid, 54)—both of which link

with the ethos of classical Indian dance as selfless offering. In this way, the dancer becomes a spiritual agent, aligning their performance with divine will. *Gita* 6.23 also echoes the meditative aspects of dance: “This is true *yoga*, the unbinding of the bonds of sorrow...” (Ibid, 92), highlighting dance’s potential as a yogic practice.

### 4.3. Interfaith and Cross-Cultural Dimensions

Dance’s spiritual resonance extends beyond Indian traditions. In Christian hymnody, Sydney Carter’s “Lord of the Dance” (1963) portrays Jesus Christ as a divine dancer, encapsulating themes of incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection through rhythmic, poetic narrative. The refrain – “Dance, then, wherever you may be, I am the Lord of the Dance, said he” – invites believers to join in a life of spiritual movement, joy and eternal connection. Rooted in Scripture (Matthew 4:19; Luke 9:23; John 11:25), the hymn metaphorically presents Jesus as both the creator and sustainer of life’s cosmic rhythm. Here, dance becomes a metaphor for resurrection and discipleship, offering a compelling theological narrative through motion.

Confucian philosophy also upholds the moral value of dance. In *The Analects* (3:1), Confucius critiques ritual excess in dance, implying that for dance to be spiritually meaningful, it must be grounded in virtue (*rén/仁*). Ritual and music (*lǐ* and *yuè*) are seen not as mechanical performances but as moral acts. A dancer lacking goodness reduces performance to hollow action. According to Peimin Ni, mastery in ritual dance involves such internalization that the dancer and the dance become indistinguishable—a principle reflecting both Confucian and Indian philosophical aesthetics (Ni, 113, 54).

The multifaceted nature of dance—as art, ritual, pedagogy, and spiritual exercise—reveals its profound role across cultures and religions. Whether practiced through Indian classical forms like *Bharatanatyam* and *Kathak*, mystical traditions like Sufi whirling or Christian hymns and Confucian rites, dance functions as a bridge between the finite and the infinite. The *guru-śiṣya* tradition emphasizes not just technical excellence but the

transformation of the self. Ultimately, dance emerges as a *Dharmic* exercise: a sacred path that transcends boundaries, nurtures holistic growth, and calls individuals and societies into deeper harmony with the divine.

## 5. Conclusion

Dance transcends mere performance, emerging as a *Dharmic* discipline that fosters spiritual insight and self-realization. Across cultures, it bridges the physical and the divine, serving as both sacred ritual and creative expression. This study critiques superficial, pleasure-driven forms of dance, affirming instead its deeper moral and spiritual intent. Dance, as *Dharma*, enacts one's duty for collective well-being, nurturing cultural vitality and personal growth. It is a life-affirming practice rooted in sacred discipline, not entertainment. Understanding diverse traditions of dance reveals its true value – as worship, philosophical reflection and a powerful medium for spiritual and material transformation.

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