The Arts Empower and Heal the Body and the Mind

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Did you know that your stomach lining changes every five days, your skin every four weeks and that your liver gets a complete overhaul every six weeks? Would you believe that every twelve weeks major changes appear in your skeletal structure? In short, as the New Age Guru Deepak Chopra says:

“You create the body you live in ... You are constantly reincarnating a new body in yourself. Just as you cannot step into the same river twice, as the water keeps flowing, so also you cannot possess the same body.”

With this miraculous vehicle we breathe millions of atoms in and out. These atoms are the same atoms which have inhabited the bodies of the Buddha, Jesus Christ and the Prophet Mohammed.

It is this constant cycle of matter being replaced, continually creating a new physical body, which lies at the heart of the Indian belief that the sharira (the body) is the link between the earth and the cosmos, between humanity and divinity where the same process of construction and de-construction is seen to take place forever. And to help the body remain healthy, the traditional knowledge of India has identified one major path: the creative impulse. Expression through the arts, music, dance, painting, sculpture, literature and poetry, is the pathway that leads to all wellness.

There are many systems of treating disease. But only one science of health. Since the body changes its entire physical structure so rapidly and thoroughly, it cannot possibly be reduced to mechanical, diagnostic deductions. True health needs to be created from within the body and with the help of awareness of its real nature. This is where the arts come in.

The idea of music and dance as therapy is a very old one. Arts such as music and dance are believed to have advantages that lead to health in a holistic manner. Indian tradition equates the arts of music and dance with those of a revealed scripture. The first book that talks about this in detail is Bharat Muni’s Natya Shastra, written circa 2,500 BC. The Natya Shastra and subsequent texts detail the effect of music and dance on the minutest muscle, the most wafer-thin layer of the body. Add to this the recent advances in scientific research, and the conclusion is exactly what the ancients said: the arts heal!

The arts are therapeutic in nature and behind the apparent good health, longevity and incredible stamina of most dancers, musicians and visual artists lies the fact that the very nature of what they do: sing, dance, paint, sculpt, etc, is an endless source of metaphorical nutrients into the body, helping to prevent or heal disorders and disease.

Sound is an integral part of life on earth and has been with us through the ages, and the creation of music is an inevitable outcome as we evolve. Hindu philosophy maintains that in the beginning there was Nada Brahma, the sound of God. In Patanjali’s Yoga Darshan, divinity is defined as a special Being and is expressed by the word pranav, loosely translated as om. The varied and vast corpus of Indian
classical music, its theories, methodologies and texts teach that while at the surface level music affects moods and emotions, at a deeper level it is a vehicle of worship and meditation.

Many believe that music has healing powers. People have described how they control their blood pressure through music and doctors have used music to control diabetes. Many believe music has the power to cure insomnia, headaches, depression and other mental problems.

The healing power of music is well known at an experiential level but scientific tests also support this belief. Recent Positron Emission Tomography (PET) studies have shown that certain types of music activate neural pathways similar to those associated with euphoria and reward. These same pathways are activated in response to other pleasurable activities like eating and sex, giving rise to emotional happiness.

It has also been shown that when contemplation, reflection and concentration are focused on a single thought, it produces a sense of well being and relaxation that stimulates the pituitary gland and releases those chemicals into the body which produce a sense of pleasure. In listening to classical Indian music, as in deep meditation, the mind focuses on a single thought, thereby producing this chemical reaction.

Swami Vasudevananda, a monk, explains the purifying force of chanting of mantras and of music as follows:

“Like everything in this universe, our body is made up of vibrating energy. Even though our body appears to be dense, every cell of the human body has its own frequency. There is a sound present in each tiny cell, however minute the cell might be. Wherever there’s movement, there’s vibration, there’s sound. The body’s inclination is to be in harmony with itself. All the different parts of the body, all its cells, want to move in unison, the way a shoal of fish or a flock of birds does ... When this natural rhythm and harmony is disrupted in the body, that’s when disease and disorders arise. However, when the vibrations of the chant sound within our bodies, the cells themselves respond; they resonate with the pure vibrations of the mantras so that harmony can be restored... Chanting calms and clears the mind and actually rejuvenates it... Everything that we listen to leaves its residue in the mind. Chanting the pure syllables of the names of God breaks through this mass of varied thoughts and impressions and opens us to a higher awareness, a clearer perception of ourselves and the world.”

In everyday life, we utilize only a small proportion of our total mental potential. The rest remains untapped due to our inattention to the vast untapped reservoir of consciousness. In this context, music, like meditation, can be redefined as a process of becoming increasingly familiar with our deepest layers of consciousness, from where thought processes originate and where they merge.

Dr Richard P. Brown, a scientist who experiments in the ways in which the Yogic techniques of breathing, pranayama, relieve stress and enable people to connect better and be healthier, recently found that these techniques of breathing activate the nerve that connects the diaphragm and some of the organs, including the heart and the
brain. As a result of this stimulation, messages are sent along three different pathways to tell the body to shut off areas of worry – in the frontal cortex and in the brain stem and then to the limbic system, which controls positive emotions, awakening it. At the same time, hormones experienced during sexual activity and the birth of a baby are released, encouraging bonding. Dr Brown points out that, amazingly, these Yogic techniques, which are at the heart of music making, can even control eating disorders by easing tension. “People often soothe themselves by eating. But after this Yoga course, as the tension drains off, people … actually begin to lose weight. The hormone that promotes connectedness also has a relationship with a peptide hormone. Controlling the release of this hormone can in turn influence hunger and the body’s ability to take only the required amount of food.”

It is clear to many that music is therapeutic, but what of dance? All exercise is conducive to good health, isn’t dance merely another form of exercise? Let us begin by deconstructing the art of dance, looking at it as exercise and comparing it to other systems of exercise.

An ideal system of exercise shares three elements, the three S’s— suppleness, strength and stamina. It should also fulfill the following requirements:

1. Make exercise an enjoyable experience, leading to the formation of a habit.
2. Have an inbuilt element of play.
3. Provide symmetry of movement and efficiently exercise every part of the body in the proper proportion.
4. Strengthen the heart, improve blood circulation and increase the capacity of the lungs.
5. Involve the brain and challenge the nervous system so as to quicken reflexes and develop an alert mind.

On all these counts no other system of exercise fulfills these criteria as well as dance. Symmetry and balance in dance are aspects which sets it apart from other exercise systems, such as aerobics or pilates. Structured along the complex lines of yogic techniques, classical dance, both in its training as well as its performance, uses symmetry and balance to create poise. Symmetry is at the heart of motion. Whatever movement is done on the left is done on the right also. There is equal involvement of the arms and the legs. In each limb, every joint is involved. There is a rhythm and regularity in each set of movements. In the Alarippu (the “Unfolding of Petals”), the three-minute dance that opens the Bharat Natyam recital, an amazing total of 238 movements are used: bending, jumping, stretching and moving the feet, heels, toes, waist, torso, neck, face, eyes and eyebrows. The dance is performed to a brisk beat, involving harmonious movement. A child as young as six or seven can perform the dance and finish with a sense of enjoyment and accomplishment.

In addition, children who are taught the different forms of Indian classical dance develop extraordinary powers of observation, expression and stamina and because they enjoy it, many stay with dance through most of their adult life.
Recent research has also shown that learning classical dance can repair far-sightedness and near-sightedness. Normally the condition worsens with age and people need more powerful lenses as time goes on. But as any dance teacher will tell you, with examples from her class, the eye movements involved in dance can improve eyesight and many youngsters have been able to do without their glasses. Simple eye exercises would not achieve the same results because routine exercise would not engage the child’s interest. During dance a child’s creative faculties are involved in the exercise and he or she is engaged in fun and play.

“A piece of your brain the size of a grain of sand contains one hundred thousand neurons, two million axions and one billion synapses, all talking to each other.”

This is how leading neuroscientist Orof. V.S. Ramachandran describes the brain in his book “Phantoms in the Brain: Probing the Mysteries of the Human Mind”. Ramachandran, who was named by Newsweek as one of the hundred most prominent people to watch in the next century, explains the presence of consciousness in humans as the result of interaction between evolutionary and cultural pressure. This interaction takes place not only with the world but also with people with whom we communicate. It is essentially an interaction between the brain and culture, one using a neural language and the other a spoken one.

Popular opinion offers a dichotomous view, a brain versus brawn paradigm. We are often told that exercise develops the body while reading, writing and thinking are meant to develop the brain. This is a flawed perception. A better way of looking at it is exemplified by the saying “a sound brain in a sound body”. While cerebral activities such as reading, writing, solving a mathematical problem, doing crosswords or participating in a seminar are primarily concerned with the brain, they are also of relevance to the body and have an impact on it. The emotions and sensory reactions created by these activities have a bearing, however subtle, through chemical signals, on the body and its health. Similarly, every kind of exercise has an impact on the brain and the nervous system.

By involving both the physical and the neurological parts of the body, dance students develop a strong ability to recall and plan, and their academic record improves significantly.

In Indian dance training, the variety of skills that are imparted range from control of the body in almost every position and movement, to a heightened sense of the body in space, and mental alertness. Such training also leads to the refinement of the reflex arcs which control equilibrium and muscle tone, such as posture, and the adjustment of a whole host of coordinated nerve fibres that belong to the nervous system. Since the nervous system connects with such elements as heart muscles, blood vessels of the respiratory system and the muscles of the digestive tract, it is easy for dance to use the connections that it creates between the two. The exercise of the skeletal muscles also plays a significant role in improving the balance between the reciprocal nerve fibres which regulate the heart muscles, blood vessels and the intestinal tract.

Since all Indian dance styles are danced with bare feet, Indian dance also brings with it the well-known benefits of acupressure. Together with the emotional and
expressional aspects, the *nritta* and the *abhinaya*, acupressure enhances the power of dance to bring about mental health.

Over a period of time, a dancer develops the ability to get more energy from less food and spend less energy doing the same amount of work. Control of unnecessary movements leads to control of expenditure of energy, which is considered the route to good health. Also, while dancing, a dancer cannot open the mouth. However difficult the steps, the dancer must retain a calm and pleasant expression and try to distribute the strain evenly to all parts of the body.

Dance is, of course, intimately connected to music, and the potent combination of the therapeutic benefits of dance and music is unmatched by any modern form of exercise.

The simple phrase, “Kita Thaka Tha Dinginathom” of Bharat Natyam, describes how the ear listens to the gait, the eye follows the hands, the mind coordinates the hands and feet to work together with the eyes and, through repetition, a synchronization of the body, the mind and the inner self is achieved. This is truly phenomenal.

Is it any wonder, then, that the *Skanda Purana* extols dance and music by saying: “geyam geya samam vidhuhu” – “there is no possible equivalent to the act of geyam (music, singing and dance) for the glory of God”.

The arts indeed heal!