

# Path of the Temple Dancer

*Indian dance provides both physical and emotional benefits, but it is first and foremost a form of worship and spiritual practice.*

**By Jalaja Bonheim**

In 1981 I was living in England, teaching German at a university, when, one drizzling grey evening, I went to the dance performance of a young Indian woman. I returned enchanted, entranced, transformed. "You have to learn this," an inner voice said with absolute certainty. I didn't understand why I was compelled to learn an obscure form of dance, but the calling nonetheless was loud and clear. I loved the beautiful silk costumes in rich purple, deep green, delicate peach, thickly embroidered with gold brocade, the luxurious exuberance of adornment with anklets and bracelets, jeweled belts, and hair smothered in jasmine. I loved the dancer's grace, the strength of her stamping feet encircled with jingling bells, the expressiveness of her face. But as I look back, I see that what really captured my attention was the glimpse of an archetype which I had never encountered before: the archetype of the temple priestess. Instantly, my soul had leapt up in recognition and cried out: "That is who I am! Her path is my path." Several months later, I was on my way to India to study the ancient tradition of Indian temple dance.

From the moment of my arrival in India, I reveled in the sensuality of life: the jasmine garlands, the chaos of smells and brilliant colors, the teeming street life. Like a child, I marveled at the tangled tropical jungle of gods and goddesses, demons and deities, saints and sacred animals that occupied every street corner, serenely showering their blessings on the madness of modern India.

Effortlessly, I was guided to the dancer who was to become my teacher, Usha Datar. Usha's tiny apartment had two rooms. At night, all the men of the family slept in one, and all the women in the other. By day, one room became a dance studio. Early in the morning, groups of tiny Indian children crowded in, their black hair glistening with fresh coconut oil, glass bangles glittering on their wrists. Later, the older girls and women came, as well as a few men. All the way down Usha's street, one could hear the sharp crack of her stick beating out the rhythms and the slapping of feet on the stone floor.

At first I felt terribly awkward. The tiniest child seemed a masterful dancer compared to myself. My body felt too large, my limbs too stiff, my hands not pliable enough. I envied the girls' glossy black hair, their almond eyes, their slender brown hands, and I grieved because I felt I had been born into the wrong racial group. Nonetheless, I learned quickly. "Many past lives," my teacher would say in a matter of fact tone. Indeed the sense of remembering something once learned but long forgotten was startling. And slowly my interest began to shift from what I looked like to the internal experience of dancing.

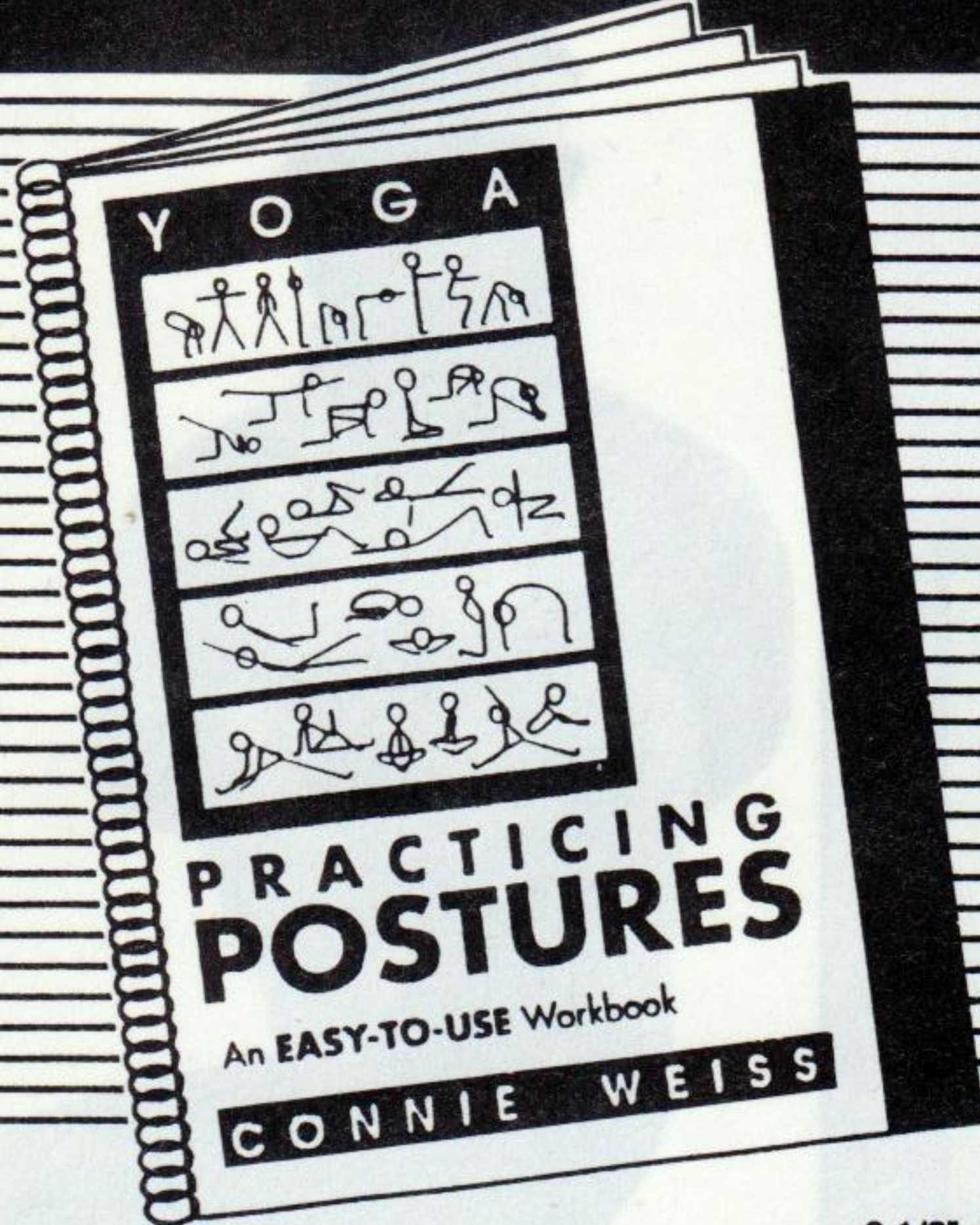


**Jalaja during a dance performance in 1984.**

During the first months of my training, I learned the *adavus*, the basic steps and movements which form the building blocks of the dance. As my body got stronger, I began to enjoy the sense of standing centered in my belly and firmly planted on the earth. I found I could rest easily in the natural weight of my body, enjoying its strength as well as its softness. Unlike the ballet dancer who strives to remain boyishly thin, the temple dancer embraces her feminine form,



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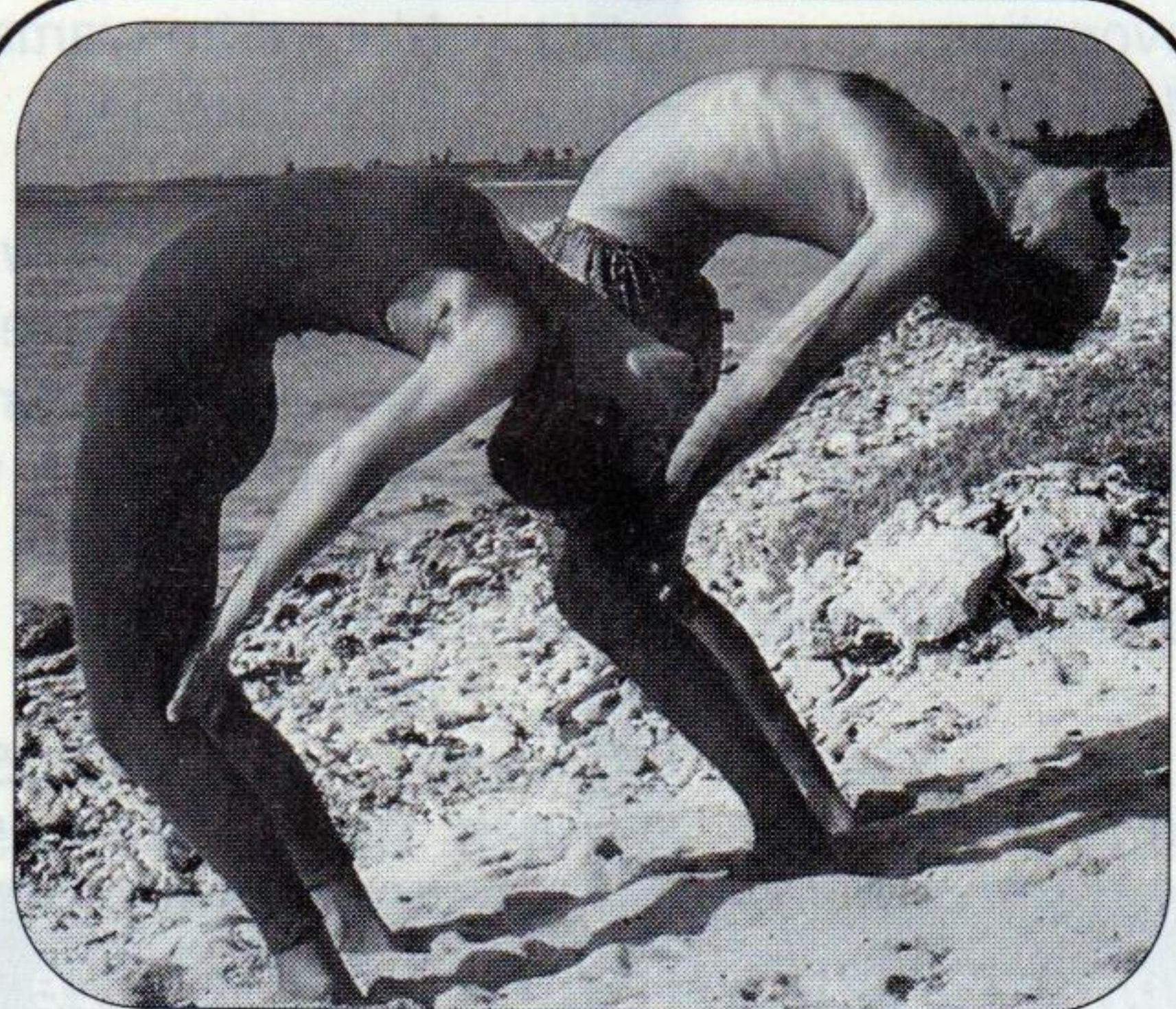
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## ARTS

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her round hips, full belly and breasts. While in ballet straight lines predominate, in temple dance everything curves, arches, spirals, and undulates.

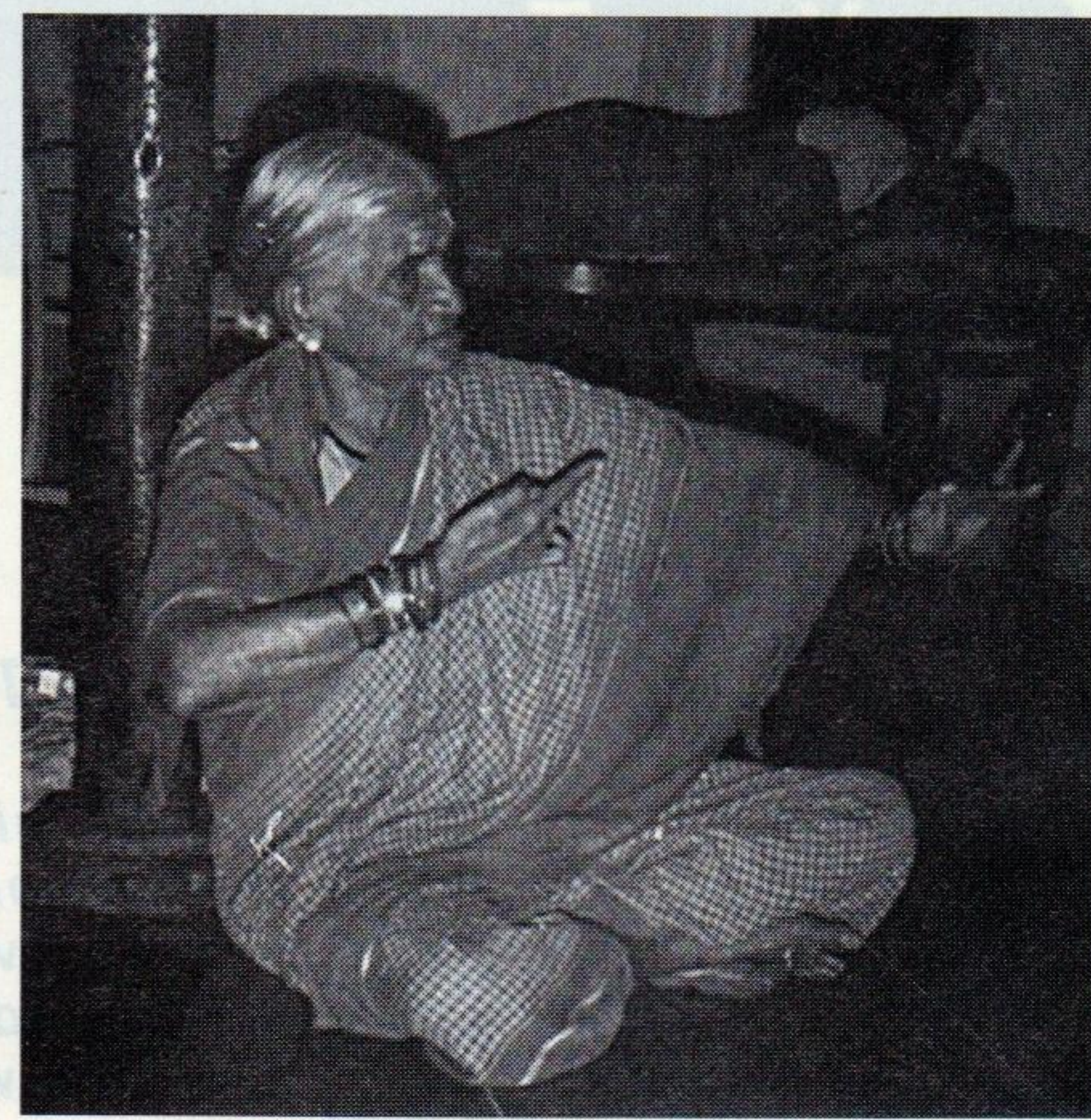
The adavus could be described as yoga postures linked through movement. I experienced first their physical healing power, the way they foster strength, balance, and flexibility. In moving from one posture into the next, I began to learn how energy flows, how transition and change arise. The internal flows of energy within the body became apparent, and I learned how movement affects these internal flows. Thus the adavus represented an introduction into a means of self-healing as well as dance. Each movement

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expresses a very specific state of consciousness, and mastery of the movement allows one to access that particular state of consciousness at will.

Once the dancer has mastered the element of so-called "pure dance," she begins to practice the telling of sacred stories through her dance. Sacred myths are stories of the soul. Before they can be transmitted to an audience, the dancer must absorb, ponder, and assimilate their inner meaning. Through this process, she discovers the principles not only of physical movement but of movement on all levels: emotional, mental, and spiritual. Therefore the path of the dance is called a *veda*: a path of spiritual knowledge.

*Mudras*, or sacred gestures, represent an important part of both the pure dance and the storytelling. The Indian science of mudra is based on an amazingly refined understanding of how movement influences the internal energy system of the



A former Devadasi, now in her 90s, does a dance expressing her devotion to Krishna.

body. At first I merely struggled to bend my fingers into the required positions. One day, as I was practicing a mudra, I suddenly saw my body as if with X-ray vision. But instead of seeing the skeletal structure, I was seeing shining blue streams of energy. For the first time, I experienced the power of the mudra, as I watched the energy stream from my heart through my shoulder, arm, and out through the palm of my hand. From then on, I could sense the inner impact of a mudra and see how the slightest change in the position of the shoulder or the wrist could alter or block the flow of energy.

Indian dance and yoga are twin disciplines which have evolved from the same origins and are based upon the same philosophical underpinnings. Whereas Judeo-Christian religion has tended to deny the spiritual nature of the body, Eastern traditions have always viewed matter as a condensed, solid manifestation of spirit, much as ice is merely solidified water. With such an understanding of the body as foundation, a wide range of body-centered spiritual practices arose.

Like the origins of yoga, so the origins of Indian temple dance reach far back in time. The *Natya Shastra*, a text which discusses all the elements of stagecraft and dance technique, is usually dated between the fourth and first centuries B.C.E. But by that time a long-standing tradition of temple dance already existed. On the walls of thousand-year-old Indian temples, one finds carvings of dancers using the same postures and hand gestures that still form the basis of Indian dance.



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## A R T S

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In ancient times, the dancers were neither performers nor entertainers. Rather, they were priestesses or devadasis, servants of the divine. Highly educated, they were trained from a young age in dance, rhythm, and music as well as in ritual and meditation, philosophy, religion, and mythology. Some of them became renowned spiritual teachers. At puberty they were married to God, much as a nun is wedded to Christ, but with one important difference: To the ancient Hindu, sexuality was sacred as a manifestation of divine creativity and of the life force which sustain the universe. During her wedding ritual, a devadasi would pick

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up a handful of tiny mustard seeds and pray that her lovers be as many as the seeds in her hand. In her lovemaking, she and her lover reenacted the union of God and Goddess, the primal act of creation. Such priestesses who practiced sacred sexuality flourished not only in India, but also in Japan, Egypt, and throughout the Middle East and Europe. In Mysore, I was fortunate to meet a Devadasi in her nineties. Blind, too frail to stand, she nonetheless insisted on giving me the gift of her dance.

To this day, the majority of temple dances center around the theme of love, sexuality, and male-female relationships. This basic duality encompasses all others: the duality of matter and spirit, of heaven and earth, of good and evil, light and dark, life and death. The dance itself is viewed as a form of lovemaking between the dancer and her spirit lover. The fruit of that lovemaking is the radiance, the joy, and the fulfillment we

feel when body, mind, emotions, and spirit harmonize. The erotic nature of the practice is unmistakable and of the greatest importance.

In recent times Hindu teachers, struck hard by the bug of Puritan morality, have tried to downplay the erotic aspects of their spiritual traditions, including the traditions of yoga and dance. Much emphasis has been placed on the monastic virtues of celibacy and asceticism. Yoga is often taught with grim righteousness, and dance with almost military rigidity. But yoga and dance were designed, not as repressive but as liberating tools. If understood rightly, these traditions can teach us to relate respectfully to our sexual energy as a sacred rather than a dangerous energy. They reveal to us the riverbeds through which energy courses through our body and teach us the skills of balancing and centering and healing ourselves. They encourage us to develop mindfulness of how we move and act within this body and to respect the workings of kundalini, the serpentine energy in the body.

Indian temple dance provides physical and emotional training, but first and foremost it is a form of worship and spiritual practice. Unfortunately, Indian dance has today become a form of popular entertainment rather than a true form of worship. Performances take place in theaters instead of in temples, and young girls are sent to dance class much as young girls in the West go to ballet class. Nonetheless, the Indian understanding of the purpose of dance remains firmly rooted in spirituality. What matters, above all, is not the dancer's outer appearance but her inner state of consciousness. Though her dance may be a beautiful sight to behold, the outer beauty has no meaning except as a reflection of the inner beauty of a soul in contact with the light. The physical dance has value because it reveals the dance of the soul, which in turn partakes in the cosmic dance.

My training as a temple dancer has given me many invaluable gifts. As a woman I have absorbed, through the very cells of my body, an understanding of the sacred feminine as graceful, soft, and sensual as well as powerful, fierce,



and wild. As a counselor I continuously integrate psychological work with movement and touch, meditation and ritual, storytelling, silence and prayer—all the essential tools of the devadasi. The dance helped me reclaim my own identity as a priestess, that is, as a woman whose life purpose derives from her commitment to spirit, who makes love to spirit and yet lives fully within the world. Having reclaimed my inner priestess, I am able recognize and empower the priestess or priest in others.

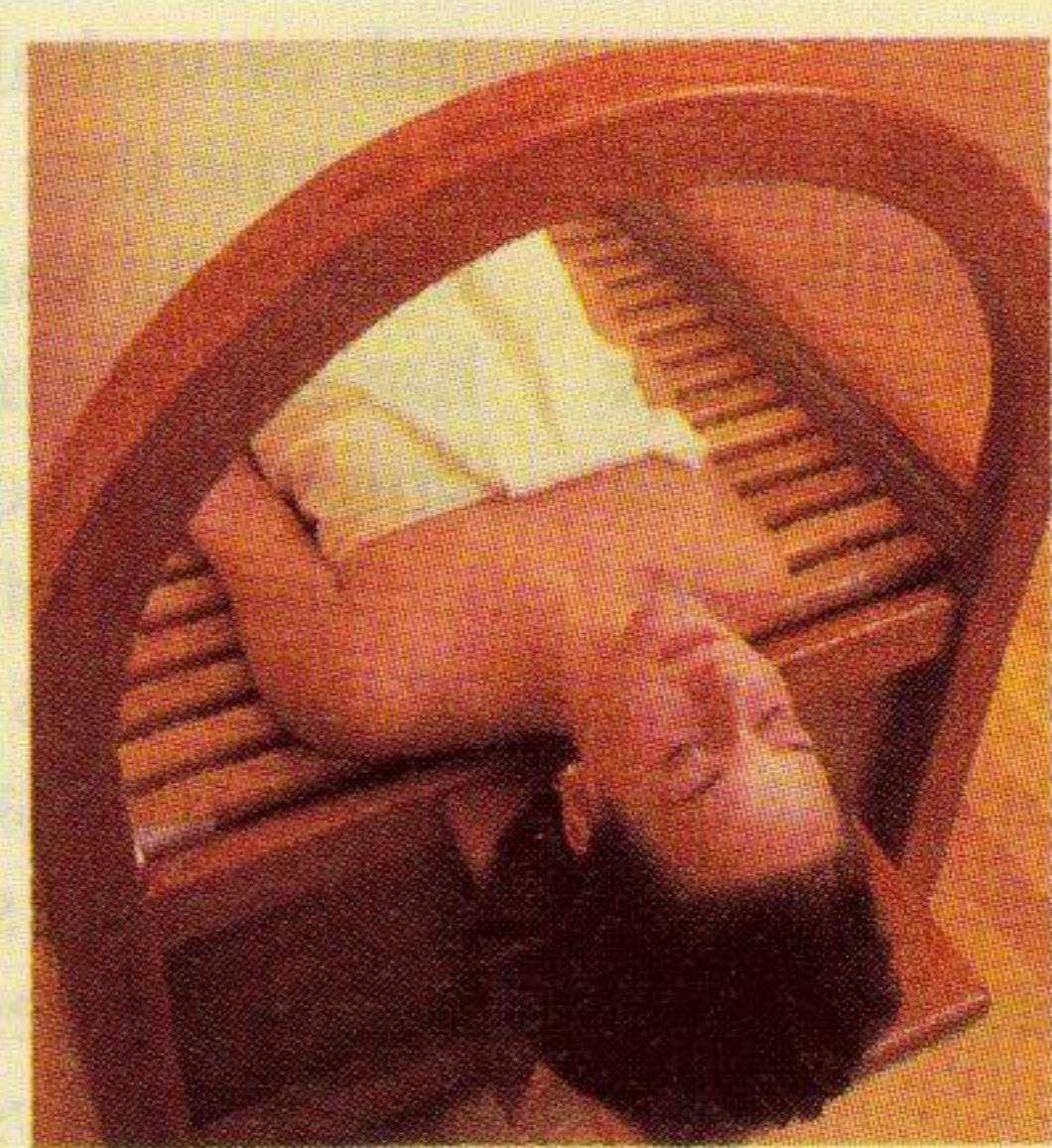
Today I no longer teach or perform Indian dance, though dance remains an essential part of my work. The ancient form represented a gateway: Having passed through the opening, it seemed inappropriate to cling to the gateposts.

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My dance training led me to the historic figure of the temple dancer, and she in turn led me to discover the priestess as an archetype within myself and others. Now even the priestess seems to be dissolving into the simplicity of the wise woman. The wise woman has stripped her life of all special trappings. The temple is gone, and so are the costumes, the ornaments, the elaborate rituals. What remains is the essence of the temple dancer: devotion to spirit and passion for the dance of body, mind, and emotions—for the dance of life. ♦

*Jalaja Bonheim, Ph.D, is a therapist and workshop leader with a private practice in Berkeley and Marin County, California. She is the author of The Serpent and the Wave: A Guide to Movement Meditation, and is currently writing a second book called Aphrodite's Daughters: On the Intersection of Sexuality and Spirituality in Women's Lives.*

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