

DANCING AMIDST FLAMES: DISCOMFORT AND SURRENDER
AS A CATALYST FOR ARTISTIC GROWTH IN
CHOREOGRAPHY AND PERFORMANCE

by

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STATEMENT OF THESIS APPROVAL

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ABSTRACT

The practice of yoga has had a profound impact on me as a dancer and artist, serving as a new lens and conceptual framework I have applied to my creative work. Both dance and yoga allow me the unique opportunity to experience who I am by emphasis on self-investigation through expansion of consciousness with the use of the body. Dance enables me to outwardly manifest my inner reality through the form of choreography and performance, while yoga encourages deep emotional reflection. I am interested in the relationship between my yoga practice and philosophical beliefs, and how each influence my creative process, choreographic works, and performance.

In this thesis, I am exploring the *tantra* yogic model of embodiment: the body is the key to transcendence; and the yogic perspective of *tapas*: the heat or resistance required for physical, mental, and spiritual transformation.

Using discomfort as a catalyst for artistic growth, I analyze and reflect upon my thesis work: “Better an ignis fattus/than no illume at all” (Better to be a foolish fire than to have no flame at all). I draw connections between the philosophical perspective of *tapas*, the *tantra* model of embodiment, and their relationship to themes in my creative work. Ultimately, this study reveals how the practice of yoga, and the concept of *tapas* has been a useful tool for my creative work, providing me artistic freedom and fortitude to embrace uncertainty with steadiness and ease.

For my parents and their unending support in all that I do.

Sting of a wasp
Rip of a Nail
A razors Slice
The needles plunge

A piercing word,
A stab of betrayal,
The boundary crossed,
A trust broken.

In this lacerating moment,
Pain is all you know
Life is tattooing scripture into your flesh,
Scribing incandescence into your nerves.

Right here
In this single, searing point
Of intolerable concentration,
Wound becomes portal.
Wound
Becomes
Portal.

Brokenness surrenders to
Crystalline brilliance of Being.

-Vijnana Bhairava Tantra, Sutra 70
translated by Lorin Roche, Ph.d (2008)

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

My yoga practice has deeply influenced how I view dance technique, choreography, performance, and my philosophical approach to dance. Similarly, my dancing practice and choreography have enabled me to experience yoga as a focused and dynamic form of self-expression. As a choreographer I am interested in the point where my dance and yoga practices intersect, influencing one another. I am fascinated by the concept of *tapas*: the heat or resistance necessary for transformation, which can potentially allow one to transcend form. In *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali* it states in relation to *tapas*: “Anything burned out will be purified. The more you fire gold, for example, the more pure it becomes” (Satchindanda, 2012, p. 75). The fire is symbolic for physical, mental and spiritual transformation.

As a result of my creative research, I have discovered that through using discomfort, heat, or resistance as a catalyst for growth, one can awaken movement and performance potential in both the physical and choreographic forms of dance. Although surrendering to discomfort (used synonymously with friction, heat, resistance, struggle, uncertainty, etc.) is difficult, my yoga practice has taught me the value of embracing moments of discomfort, knowing that through surrendering, I can be metaphorically reborn, or transformed. My dancing, choreography, and performance have instilled in me

the same values, serving as a method of embodying and practicing yogic principles, such as *tapas*.

Author and psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi wrote about a similar discomfort as a mode of self-expansion. In his book *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, he acknowledges that:

The best moments usually occur when a person's body or mind is stretched to its limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile...such experiences are not necessarily pleasant at the time they occur... Getting control of life is never easy, and sometimes it can be definitely painful (1990, p. 3).

In moments of discomfort, or *tapas*, one is engulfed by the experience or task at hand, enabling one to simultaneously lose and find oneself. Csikzenmihalyi explains this phenomenon as an opportunity to confront one's personal inhibitions, leading to self-transcendence (1990). Through *tapas*, or moments when the "body or mind is stretched" one is empowered to become fully immersed in the moment, despite any pain that may occur.

I am empowered to conquer discomfort, fear of the unknown, heat, and resistance with steadiness and ease through dance. My dancing and choreography allow me to outwardly manifest the inner experience that occurs through transformative circumstances such as *tapas*. Through my choreography I communicate to an audience that in moments of discomfort, we all have the ability to be transformed if we learn to stand amidst the flames with grace. This is not implying that struggle does not exist, rather through the act of embracing struggle, an opportunity for mental, physical, and spiritual transformation presents itself.

My creative interests address the relationship between the *tantra* yogic model of

embodiment, the yogic perspective of *tapas*, and their relevance to contemporary dance. I specify the *tantra* perspective of embodiment because it emphasizes the importance and uniqueness of the individual. This model maintains that the body is the means through which transformation can occur. In *tantra*, the body is the key to achieving one's fullest potential, aligning this perspective with dance and performance because in dance, the body is the means for artistic and personal expression.

In this thesis, I will describe how yogic philosophy and metaphor influence my artistic endeavors, surrendering to the unknown of making art in a form that utilizes the body as the medium for creation. Chapter II will outline my personal background, providing examples of experiences that have led to my fascination with *tapas*. In Chapter II I will additionally describe my perspective of the relationship between yoga and dance, offering information about historical and contemporary choreographers working in similar modalities. Chapter III will discuss *tapas*, ritual, and the *tantra* model of embodiment in relationship to my experience as a dancer and choreographer. In Chapter IV I will examine my past creative works: "Moirai" and "Dark/Light," as well as the creative process for my thesis work: "Better an ignis fattus/than no illume at all." Chapter V will consider myth, metaphor and meaning making in regards to my creative work. Lastly, in Chapter VI, I will conclude my research findings through my own philosophical beliefs about dance.

Through research, I have discovered that my creative interests elicited an experience of *tapas* that ultimately influenced the final choreographic presentation of "Better an ignis fattus/than no illume at all." Using discomfort as a catalyst for artistic

growth, this research finds itself at a crux between art and reality, where the art of dance serves as both an experience and representation of *tapas*.

CHAPTER II

MOVING PRANA: DANCE, YOGA, LIFE, AND ARTISTRY

The dance is motion, which is life, beauty, which is love, proportion, which is power. To dance is to live life in its higher and finer vibrations, to live life harmonized, purified, controlled. To dance is to feel one's self actually a part of the cosmic world, rooted in the inner reality of spiritual being. (Ruth St. Denis as listed in Brown, 1979, p. 22)

The first time I felt and deliberately acknowledged dance as a human-to-human interaction, rather than a technically virtuosic feat was at the University of Utah's Salt Dance Festival in 2013. During this festival I had the pleasure of working with choreographer Miguel Gutierrez in his improvisation class, *Ineffable, Intangible, Sensational*, which proved influential to me in all facets of dance and choreography.

Throughout the 2 weeks we tapped into our senses with the workings of Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen's, *Body Mind Centering* and considered the writing of Mark Johnson's book *The Meaning of the Body: Aesthetics of Human Understanding*. I felt as though I was making a return to my roots as a beginning dancer, except this time I had more dance experience, and was able to understand what Miguel Gutierrez was conveying at a deeper level. During the workshop we particularly focused on perception, or more specifically, our perceived movement potential as dancers. Miguel facilitated the considering of our choice making in movement preferences, expanding our potential as movers. We spent an

in-depth amount of time exploring the world around us through our senses, ultimately broadening the possibilities of how we perceived ourselves as movers in relation to our environment.

In this workshop, we also began using our voices as important parts of our bodies. I recall having the realization that dance involves the entire body, and that voice is an energetic vibration of what our body is capable of producing. This notion excited me, and I started making connections between the workshop materials that Miguel presented to us, and my inner experiences in yoga classes as they pertain to my dance training. I realized dance has the potential to be anything the dancer envisions, and should be encompassing of one's self. Overall, Miguel challenged my perception of dance and my movement potential. Completely overwhelmed in the final showing of the Salt Dance Festival, June 14th, 2013 I wrote:

...Have you ever been performing before and felt like your heart was completely bursting out of your chest? Almost as if your heart space was cracking open and the audience could see every part of you? Well I have, I did. Tonight. This is the first time that has ever happened to me and it was magical. Is this what it feels like to allow yourself to be completely vulnerable in a performance context? If so, it wasn't scary, in fact, I've never quite felt so alive. Perhaps that is what performing is about, or at least, this is what I think it should be...

The practice and artistry of dance is a way of experiencing one's self in a heightened sensorial state, yet it was not until I came to Utah and became re-interested in yoga or studied with artists such as Gutierrez and others, that I felt I could make connections between myself as a human being and myself as a dancer.

Recognizing that there is no separation between me as a dancer and me as a human, the creative work I have made has been a re-investigation and search for the feelings that were evoked at the Salt Dance Festival, whether as a performer,

choreographer, or viewer of dance. From that experience I began to question what would happen if I rejected barriers between my creative work and my inner experiences? What if my creative work became a mode of self-investigation, a mirror of my existence? What if dance became a form of yoga for me? The word yoga translated means union, and dance can be a form of uniting all parts of myself with my “dancer” self.

My journey as a dancer began later in life at the age of 19. At the time, I never imagined that dance would play as much of a pivotal role in my life as it does today. As an individual, I have always understood my role in the world through movement, yet being a beginning dancer as an adult made it much more of a challenge for me. These challenges were amplified by feeling as though I was playing “catch up,” or comparing myself to others who had been in the field much longer. This struggle remains with me to this day, regardless of how advanced or proficient I become. As a result I am constantly confronting challenges mentally and physically, pushing myself beyond what I perceive as my own potential. Additionally, I refuse to allow myself to reach a point of finality within my dancing where I can no longer grow beyond; this results in a constant expansion of my own physical and artistic frontier. My consistent encountering and acceptance of challenges in my dancing has been exceptionally transformative for me in all facets of my life.

Dance encapsulates my entire being. My choreographic work enables me to explore the deepest recesses of my mind as movement material from my subconscious spills from my body onto the dance floor, allowing me to see and experience what is happening inside of me in a different way. When I choreograph I want to see my own sense of fearlessness, fierceness and humility in my dancers. However, through the process of

setting movement for others, I notice there is a discrepancy between my sensed and felt perception of my movement qualities and how they appear outwardly. When I acknowledge this inconsistency, there is discomfort upon viewing, which I choose to embrace and investigate as it is brought to my attention.

Yoga, for me, has an uncanny resemblance to dance. In both dance and yoga practices I am connecting to something deep within myself, yet beyond my physical body. I am keenly connected to my body through breath awareness and as a result, I am able to energetically reach beyond its physical limitations, transcending its form. According to Philosopher Hazrat Inayat Khan, the body is a “vehicle of the spirit” (1983). The vehicle of the body, as Kahn states, houses the paradoxical nature of life: “positive and negative”; “expressive and responsive”; “spirit and nature”; and the senses through which we are able to experience this paradox (1983). These dualities have long been recognized in traditional Indian dance where the dance and the dancer are thought of as existing in reality, yet expressed through divine energy (Kumar, 2006). In a sense, the dancer embodies and expresses paradox through engaging in the form of dance, a concept that my interests as a dance artist emulate:

Besides, dance was a thing beyond the form in which it revealed, as also beyond what it revealed. It revealed anger, destruction, or a violent mind, but it was neither. It revealed love, love's longing, or infatuation, but it was not dragged [*sic*] away by them. The anatomy of the dancer wherein dance manifested was not the anatomy of dance. The dance did not inseparably merge into its medium, as did mediums and themes in other arts. The dance was more or less an abstract vision – a form which was as much formless, an appearance, as much a “non-appearance,” something of a spiritual experience which a materially manifesting vision inspired (Kumar, 2006 p. 2).

My dancing causes my senses to become heightened, transporting everything around me to another time and space. Both dance and yoga allow me to feel powerful, unstoppable,

at ease, and as if I embody magic. This all serves as a testament to my belief of living my life in a consciously embodied state. I do not view dance and yoga as separate, but rather as one intertwining with the other. As the yogic perspective of embodiment influences how I live my life and how I experience dance, my choreography is a reflection of the yogic system of experiencing the world. Dance is my passion, my mode of self-realization, self-reflection, commentary, and communication. Through dance I am able to outwardly communicate the role that yogic philosophies play in my life, transforming my consciousness.

Joseph Campbell speaks of consciousness as not “something peculiar to the head” but equivalent to life energy (Campbell & Moyers, 1988, p. 14). In yoga, this would be referred to as *Prana*, and yogic practices are focused on moving *Prana* through the physical body to transform the practitioner’s mental, and energetic bodies. Taking the perspective of Joseph Campbell on consciousness, dance (like yoga) has the power to transform us because it induces a transcendent state, one that requires intention, thought, and awareness of how to utilize energetic qualities in the body.

Through physical practices such as yoga and dance, one has the opportunity to use energy in the body to extend consciousness beyond the physical form. This potency of the body has been deeply researched as Jean Houston states: “well documented feats of yogis and research from the bio feedback labs demonstrate that consciousness can be extended through our bodies” (1982, p. 2). If dance extends and transforms the consciousness of the dancer, how can choreography also serve as a method of transformation for an audience?

The pivotal markers of transformation are in the heated, struggle, uncomfortable,

and dark moments. Stated beautifully by Joseph Campbell: “At the bottom of the abyss comes the voice of salvation. The black moment is the moment when the real message of transformation is going to come. At the darkest moments comes the light” (Campbell & Moyers, 1988, p. 37). This viewpoint is related to *tapas*, draws me to the practice of yoga, and is a defining impetus in my creative work.

The Existing Relationship Between Yoga and Dance

In recent years contemporary dance practices have incorporated concepts of yoga into training idioms. *The Body Eclectic: Evolving Practices in Dance Training*, discusses yoga as a means to train the body in a multifaceted way (Bales & Nettle-Foil, 2008). Throughout the book there are many examples of current dancers utilizing the power of yoga as a means to train the body and mind, ultimately giving new physical and performative dimension to dancers. Speaking to my own viewpoint about the power of yoga for dancers, Karen Graham mentions that yoga is a way of quieting the body and mind in a way that allows one to “reopen and reveal” one’s truest essence, the deepest parts of one’s self (Bales & Nettle-Foil, 2008). The reopening and revealing that Graham comments on, which I experience as a yoga practitioner, is notably informative to my choreographic approach. Similarly, many of the early modern dance artists used concepts of yoga as inspiration for their creative work and philosophical beliefs about dance.

Modern dance pioneer Ruth St. Denis believed that “dance begins in consciousness, not in the body” (Reynolds & McCormick, 2003, p. 23). Her writing about dance relates to yogic themes of the vehicle of the body housing the spirit, and the divinity of life:

We can not, of course, communicate, in any language, what we do not feel or know. But in modern times we have used almost exclusively the language of the intellect- speech- to express all states of our consciousness, and by so doing we have inhibited and dwarfed the physical and emotional beauty of the self, while the spiritual consciousness has sought entirely other means for its expression, not knowing that dancing in its nobler uses is the very temple and word of the living spirit (Brown, 1979, p. 23).

St. Denis is also widely recognized for her use of Indian religious themes in her choreographic works: “The Incense,” “The Cobras,” “The Yogi,” “Nautch,” and “Radha” (Reynolds & McCormick, 2003, p. 24). In her choreography “Radha,” inspired by the Hindu goddess of the same name, St. Denis used symbols of the five senses to create choreography that encompassed states of both wild abandon and meditation, capturing a similar essence to the transformative nature I seek in my own creative pursuits (2003). Additionally, the poetry in her book *Lotus Light* bears a striking resemblance to the writing in the *Vijnana Bhairava Tantra*, the ancient Indian text depicting a conversation between “the Goddess who is the creative power of the universe, and the God who is consciousness that permeates everywhere” (Roche, 2008, p. vii).

Stemming from the lineage of Ruth St. Denis, yet with her own values and beliefs, Martha Graham is another historical example of a choreographer working with similar interests to mine. Comparative to the *tantra* perspective of embodiment, Martha Graham firmly believed in the divinity of the human body, often referring to the body as “the basic instrument, intuitive, instinctive” (Brown, 1979, p. 51). While Graham did not use yogic themes in her choreography, her work did explore the individual psyche, and she proclaimed that “art is the evocation of man’s inner nature”, a concept accordant with yogic philosophies (Brown, 1979, p. 50). Martha Graham is credited for her use of storytelling, mythology, and metaphor in her creative works as a way to analyze the

darker capacities of one's soul (Au, 1988). She valued the importance of communicating the individual's inner world, having stated:

The reality of the dance is its truth to our inner life. Therein lies its power to move and communicate experience. The reality of dance can be brought into focus – that is into the realm of human values – by simple, direct, objective means. We are a visually stimulated world today. The eye is to not be denied. Dance need not change – it has only to stand revealed (Brown, 1979, pp. 52-53).

Graham is suggesting that through dance, one is able to share an inner experience, outwardly to an audience. As a choreographer I view dance as a way of revealing and embodying one's energetic resonance, truest nature, and beliefs, relating my values as a choreographer to those of Graham and St. Denis. Although both Graham and St. Denis are historical figures in modern dance, often revered as modern dance pioneers, I believe their philosophies are still profoundly current.

More recently in the realm of contemporary dance, other artists seamlessly research similar subject matter in their dancing and choreography. Of particular interest to me is choreographer Akram Khan because he blends his background in the classical Indian dance form Khatak, with contemporary dance. Kahn has a fascination with story telling through movement, an aspect of his work that resonates with me as a viewer. His work asks what it is to be human, and frequently demonstrates themes of transformation.

In his work “Vertical Road ” (2010) which I saw live in 2012, Khan explores “man's earthly nature, his rituals, and the consequences of human actions... a meditation from gravity to grace” (Akram Khan Company). I recall witnessing this piece live and finding myself speechless after the performance, only with the knowledge that through the act of viewing “Vertical Road,” I was changed. The thematic material and movement quality of the dancers aligned with my dance and choreographic interests, leaving me

with a sense of complete satisfaction and an excitement for my own creative endeavors upon viewing.

Additionally, Akram Khan's work "Gnosis" (2009) has themes of transformation through exploring the idea of one's "knowledge within" and concepts of paradox between the human and the godly (Akram Khan Company). As a viewer I can see the theme of *tapas* throughout both of these full-length works. While I am not aware that Khan is intentionally researching *tapas* in the creative process, his aesthetic and choreographic interests intrigue me.

Tapas, Dance, and Yoga Intertwined

The concept of *tapas*, in yoga, is a discipline understood as a means for spiritual growth or transformation (Easwaren, 2007). The root of the Sanskrit word is *tap*, literally meaning to be hot or to suffer pain, thus, *tapas* means heat or suffering (Easwaren, 2007). *Tapas* are a way of purifying the body and mind, allowing space for personal growth, empowerment and transformation – an impetus for my creative work.

In yoga, the emphasis is placed on the individual experience. It is not a form to communicate or to "show," rather it is an extensive mode of self-investigation and expansion of personal potential. Modern researchers have discovered and validated the accuracy in yogic philosophies that expand consciousness through the physicality of the body (Houston, 1982). Similarly, dance offers expansion of physical awareness, allowing one to broaden one's sense of self through the power of expressive movement.

Dance is a form of art, and more importantly, a form of communication. As a choreographer I am always asking myself: "what is the work trying to say?" While this

may be an important aspect of my creative endeavors, the intention of choreographers to use dance as a form of communication varies widely. For choreographers such as Martha Graham or Akram Khan, as mentioned earlier, communication is a primary driver; yet on the other end of the spectrum, dance artist Yvonne Rainer rejects dance as a form of communication as outlined in her writing *The Mind is a Muscle* (Brown, 1979). Both are valuable ways of approaching dance and choreography, yet I tend to identify myself on the communicative spectrum of art-works, using dance as a physical form of self-expression and conversation.

While dancing, I share the indescribable felt and inner qualities that I encounter through both yoga and dance, that (I believe) lie at the core of all humans. Through the artistry of choreography I seek to share an experiential state with an audience. Clarissa Pinkola Estés speaks to this notion in her book *The Women Who Run with the Wolves*, wherein she discusses that the basic material of all stories in the world began with someone's need to communicate their experience in this "inexplicable psychic land" (1995, p. 27).

This "psychic land," also known as the "locus betwixt worlds," "Nod," "home of the mist beings," or the "crack between the worlds" is Estés referring to the inner, transformative experience that I attempt to convey in my creative work (1995, p. 27). While I arrive to this wisdom through the forms of yoga and dance, it is only through dance that I am able to share my experience with others. Barbara Meyerhoff discusses the intangibility of transformative experiences, recognizing that performance is an important aspect of understanding them, saying: "... like dreams, they are fundamentally non-linear, non-discursive, and non-linguistic" (1990, p. 246). For me, choreography is a way

to understand and share an intangible inner reality that words cannot honorably communicate. In this way, dance serves as a way to physically inhabit personal philosophical beliefs.

CHAPTER III

YOGA, THE TANTRA PERSPECTIVE OF EMBODIMENT AND RITUAL

An artist learns how to attune themselves to the energy that is present and find the resonance in their heart to transform the self-doing of art into that inexpressible flow of presence, of *rasa*. –Shiva Rea

A deeper philosophical understanding of yoga *asana* (seat) reveals that the practitioner claims the seat of the many different sages, warriors, plants, animals, and so on, in order to gain a deeper knowledge of oneself, all while bringing awareness to each moment. For example, in the *Virabhadrasana II*, or more widely known as warrior two, one stands in a deep, externally rotated lunging stance, arms radiating out from the shoulder joint and the *drishti* (or gaze) over the forward middle finger. In this pose, the alignment, focus, and breath patterning is specific. It may seem as though one is contained or limited, but in the act of remaining in the physical position and bringing awareness to one's breath and body, the body seemingly transcends the limitations of the *asana*, claiming the empowered seat of the metaphorical warrior.

By embodying the metaphorical warrior, one begins to understand a sense of empowerment through doing, connecting the mystery of one's known existence with one's potential existence. This process of inner to outer learning and the continuum

between the metaphoric and reality, is what provides the individual with a deeper sense of self-knowledge and understanding. This journey is a theory that Campbell and Moyers believe one must continue striving to comprehend, which makes the journey of self-discovery an endless and unyielding pursuit (1988).

Both yoga and dance allow a person to understand more about his- or her-self through engagement of the mental, physical and the subtle bodies (energy patterns), allowing a greater depth of self-awareness, through the exploration of the body. In her book *The Subtle Body*, Cyndi Dale refers to the subtle body as the invisible or felt qualities of a person's physical, emotional, mental and spiritual being (2009). Many cultures have believed that humans are made up of more than merely the vehicle of their bodies. Rather, we are composed of vibrations that interact and react with the world around us, comprising the subtle body (Dale, 2009). These experiential qualities all merge in the subtle body and can be accessed by certain practices such as yoga and dance. When I am practicing yoga and dancing, I am actively engaged in the vibrational resonance of my body and the bodies of those around me, creating a sense of connectedness to something greater than what I might experience in my average, everyday existence.

The *tantra* perspective of yoga maintains that the vehicle of the body holds the key to all aspects of life, allowing one to live out their fullest potential in the world through the physicality of the body. *Tantra* is an experiential study of life which encourages individuals to expand their perception through conscious control of the subtle body (Stryker, 2014). Using the mystical anatomy of the *chakras* and *nadis*, the body is viewed as the "supreme temple of transmutation, the place where all the forces of the

Universe gather to be transformed into a higher integral order of nature and spirit” (Houston, 1992, p. 7). It is believed in *tantra* that through increased sensorial and perceptive awareness, a person can use energy to create heat or *tapas*, enabling one to actualize and expand potential, thereby achieving a transformative experience (Stryker, 2014). Energy, in this case, is created through the modalities of *pranayama* (breath), *bhandas* (energy locks), *drishti* (focus), *chakras* (energetic wheels), *vayus* (movement patterns of energy), *koshas* (energetic sheaths), *nadis* (channels through which energies of the subtle body flow), and *mantra* (vocalization).

As a dance artist, I am interested in the use of the *chakras*, *nadis*, *vayus*, *mantra*, and yogic ritual as they relate to the performance of movement. These forms have re-shaped my reality in terms of how I experience the complexity of my body in space, and how I relate my inner, felt world, to my outer surroundings.

Chakras, Nadis, and Vayus

A defining characteristic of my movement language consists of initiation and undulation of the spine, moving from its base to the crown of my head, and back down, finding three dimensionality of the body through expression of the spinal column. Stemming from over 4,000 years of Indian history as “Esoteric Anatomy,” the *tantra* model believes energy descends from the crown of the head and runs to the base of the spine, or root chakra where kundalini energy (potential energy) lies dormant (Dale, 2009).

Each of the seven chakras exists along the spinal column between the top of the head (crown) and the base of the spine (root), representing a different level of

consciousness. Chakras must be opened through yogic practice and once unlocked create a path of enlightenment along the spine (Dale, 2009). In dance an aligned spine is important because it creates fluidity of movement from the core of a dancer's body, outwardly to their periphery in a supported, dimensional, and expressive manner. Through the chakras, my movement vocabulary originates from the deepest layers of my body, producing and emphasizing emotive qualities, heightening my perception of presence within the vehicle of my body.

Corresponding with the chakra system are the three nadis, nadi meaning flow. The central nadi, called the *sushumna*, lies along the spine and is where “presence lies” (Stryker, 2014). Positioned on the right is the *pingala* nadi, associated with masculine energy; and on the left, the *ida* nadi, symbolic for feminine energy (Dale, 2009). The *ida* and *pingala* interweave the *sushumna* nadi and intersect each of the *chakras* along the spine (Dale, 2009). A similar image of this intersection between the *chakras* and *nadis* is demonstrated in the Western medical symbol of the caduceus (Dale, 2009). In my dance practice I envision this entwining of three parts as a joining of the right and left sides of my body as they meet in the center, further amplifying my sense of proprioception, and connectivity. Additionally, the notion of uniting opposing forces in my body (masculine and feminine) interests me as I tap into my own inner strength and softness as I dance, embodying my own paradoxical nature.

It is important to note that the *chakra* and *nadi* model is believed to exist in all humans and varies in dominance from person to person. Nevertheless, when the systems are in complete balance, the individual experiences equilibrium of masculine and feminine energy (embodiment of paradox), lighting up the “wheels of light” that each

spinning chakra represents (Dale, 2009, p. 236). This model of embodiment is of particular interest to me, as it symbolizes the multifaceted and complex make up of the individual. These complimentary qualities and forces that make up the individual are evidence of a “self within the self” (Dale, 2009, p. 234).

I find the idea of an entire world that exists within the vehicle of the body profound, and this relates to the way I experience my own body when dancing, as well as my choreographic interests. For me, using the concept of an energetic world within the body allows me to experience my body as transparent, revealing inner worlds, in an outwardly performance context. When I am dancing, I seek to transcend my physical embodiment, extending energetic presence like beams of light radiating from my physical form and connecting me to the universe.

In addition to the *chakra* and *nadi* system, another integral component of my dancing and choreographic process, and of particular interest to my dancers, is experience with energetic waves, or *vayus*. The five *vayus* are movement patterns that map the progression of energy in the body in relationship to the space around one’s self. They include: *Prana*, or life force, and are the waves moving upward that are associated with the five senses; *Udana*, the wave associated with consciousness moving in a circular pattern up and out of the body; *Vyana*, the energetic wave moving from the center of the body to the periphery; *Samana*, the incoming and gathering of energy into the midline of the body; and *Apana*, the eliminating or downward grounding movement of energy (Dale, 2009).

The wisdom of the *vayus* lends itself to a deep, three-dimensional experience of the body, as well as the space around oneself. In many ways, attention to these energy

waves allow an individual to extend consciousness beyond their physical form, just as in the previous example of the warrior two pose. In dance, with knowledge of these forms, I have completely shifted the way I experience myself in relation to others and my environment through the expanding, contracting, rising, falling and circular sensations associated with the *vayus*. This has allowed me to feel the space I physically inhabit, and the space around me, as one.

Forms of the *chakras*, *nadis*, and *vayus* have the potential to be experienced in any context yet are often explored in the ritual practice of yoga. Each time I practice yoga I engage in a form of ritual, a specific physically and mentally concentrated practice that is constructed as a means for transformation. The *tantra* perspective contains ritual as an important aspect of daily life, reconstructing mundane daily activities into an act of being in touch with a greater, energetic existence, bringing one into an intimate relationship with one's surroundings.

Ritual

While the physical body can be transformed by becoming familiar with its esoteric anatomy, transformation can also occur through ritual by exploring the relationship between one's body and environment. Dance ritual has been used throughout human existence as a means for transformation and I have connected the concept of ritual to my creative interests in *tapas*. Campbell and Moyers state that the act of a ritual is the enactment of a myth, making participation in a ritual an act of myth making (1988). Transformation through ritual is a fundamental concern, balancing the mysteries of life and death, the paradoxical nature inherent in life (Campbell & Moyers, 1988). Within

many rituals, there is a period of separation from the group or community, followed by an initiation period when the individual returns to the group with a new sense of independence, yet also a feeling of belonging with the group; a formula that was represented in my creative work: “Better an ignis fatus/than no illume at all” (Campbell, 1972).

The movement of dance can also play a significant part in ritual and can shape its objective. In her writing, *Trance and Ecstatic Dance*, Erika Bourignon describes trance dance as an element of ritual that serves as a vehicle for mystic states in which altered consciousness and sense perception occurs (2001). This altered state is heightened through the body, representing an inner transformation of the individual, outwardly to an audience, a required element of a ritual performance (Bourignon, 2001). The performer will typically partake in spinning, circular, spiraling, rotational movements as a way of heightening the experience by creating a psychological effect on the body (Bourignon, 2001). Similarly, my cultivated movement attributes contain rotational movements of the body both stationary and in locomotion, creating a push-pull essence of movement that is representative of the competing and opposing forces and tension in the body. This meeting of oppositional forces in the body and space can stir up emotions, creating a revealing performance context where the body of the performer becomes transparent.

In her book *Homo Aestheticus: Where Art Comes From and Why*, Ellen Dissanayake describes both ritual and art forms that have the intent of putting individuals’ emotions on display, which makes them compelling for the performer and audience (1992). Rituals typically use the exaggeration and repetition of movement or sound, along with elaboration of the environment with props. All of which are elements

in a yoga asana practice, and were encompassed in my thesis creative work (Dissananyake, 1992). The formalized nature of rituals makes them what Dissananyake refers to as “socially reinforcing,” bringing performer and audience into one universal mood, providing a state of transcendence for all (1992). In my creative work I am interested in the ability of dance to bring audience and performer together, and the power of dance as a transformative experience for both the audience and performer. Through finding the proper form for a dance piece to live within, I believe it is possible for dance to communicate, as well as allow an audience to be transformed, much like the sense of enlightenment I encountered upon viewing Akram Khans “Vertical Road” in 2012.

Dissananyake refers to the arts as “containers for, molders of feeling” (1992, p. 46). My thesis work, “Better an ignis fattus/than no illume at all,” contained the inspiration of ritual as the form that housed the energetic qualities I know from yoga and dance. These practices have become pivotal markers of my expressive and creative aesthetic: the struggle and transformative aspects of life, and the different stages of the creative process I explored with my dancers.

CHAPTER IV

SPIRIT IN MOTION: THE CREATIVE PROCESS

Form is the shape of content. Form without content becomes form for the sake of form. Inspiration has to be there to make a form live. The form should contain the original impetus out of which it was created. If the form emerged from an emotional ingredient, then that emotional ingredient must be there (Hanya Holm as quoted in Brown, 1979, p. 78).

During my second year of graduate school I endured personal hardship as I was working on my solo “Dark/Light” and simultaneously my trio, “Morai.” Both works were created following unexpected death and personal turmoil, which compelled me to question existence, having the realization that life is filled with far more uncertainty than ordinarily acknowledged or realized. This uncertainty created an inner friction, evoking in me a sense of being constricted and confined.

Both of the creative works I was making at that time reflected my mental state in the ways I worked with space. For example, in “Dark/Light” I conceptually explored physical and emotional confinement and the choice one has to break free. For a majority of the piece I was stationary, and when I eventually began to move, it was within a defined circle of light. After repetitive circular steps that gradually built in speed and size, I was able to break out of the limitations of the space. However, it was not until the end of the piece that I ventured out of the circle of light.

Another metaphor for my inner reality can be witnessed in my work, “Moirai.” In this piece, I initially became interested in exploring the concept of *tapas* both metaphorically and physically. While the theme of *tapas* was present in “Dark/Light,” I did not bring full attention to the exploration until the making of “Moirai.” The build of heat in “Moirai” took place within a restricted space between dancers who remained side-by-side in a line traveling from upstage, straight downstage, frenetically toward the audience. Heat was also created within the bodies of each of the dancers. It began with softer hypnotizing circular rib movement that gradually overtook the dancers’ bodies and elicited a sense of untamed vigor. The movement quality was constricted, and the dancers remained in their confined spatial arrangement, similarly to “Dark/Light,” breaking out of their path at the very end.

Within “Dark/Light” and “Moirai,” I was outwardly manifesting what I felt as an internal experience, seeing and experiencing it in a different light, sharing that experience with others. Upon viewing both of these works, I was faced with my own discomfort at the visual depiction of my inner reality. The choice of “breaking free” from the form at the end of each piece was my recognition and reassurance that in the end, the tension and confinement of space would reopen. The darkness will become lighter.

From Ember to Flame: Deepening and Expanding the
Exploration and Embodiment of Transformation in
“Better an Ignis Fattus/than no illume at all”

The beginning rehearsals for “Better an ignis fattus/than no illume at all” took place with the dancers learning movement material as I would improvise on the spot, and

they witnessed and learned what they could. Following this, we would go back, and collectively attempt to figure out what had been done. This cycle continued until as a group we had refined the steps into choreographic phrases that were later used in the creative work.

Corresponding to the phrase material was an improvisational exercise I named the “bottom three practice.” This activity was inspired by a workshop I did with yoga master, Rod Stryker, in which he explained that all human self doubts, fears and insecurities are held in the bottom three *chakras* (Stryker, 2014). In a typical kundalini yoga practice, energy is used in the body to reverse *prana* (upward flowing energy of the *vayus*) and *apana* (downward flowing energy of the *vayus*) energy in the body so that *prana* moves downward, and *apana* moves upward, creating a metaphoric firepit in the belly that burns away impurities (self doubt, insecurities and fears) that are contained in this region (Stryker, 2014). Through the “bottom three practice” the dancers engaged in an improvisational exercise that focused on creating heat in the body through movement of the root chakra at the base of the spine (*muladhara*), sacral chakra (*svadhishtana*), and the solar plexus/navel chakra (*manipura*). As the dancers applied principles from the “bottom three practice” they gradually became more expressive in their upper spine, creating fluid movement of energy from the base of their spine upwardly through the crown of their heads.

During the early rehearsals, I also introduced my dancers to the concepts of the *nadis* and *vayus*. Together, standing in a circle we meditated and moved our bodies in relation to the energetic waves (*vayus*) using *mudras* (hand gestures) I had learned from my yoga teacher, Jennifer Ellen Mueller. These *mudras* became a basis of understanding

through the ability to physicalize the movement of the *vayus*. Additionally, these *mudras* later influenced how the dancers experienced themselves in relationship to the phrase material they had been working with. Upon reflection of these practices the dancers commented that they: “felt the flow of chakras,” were “connected to a pure place,” had the ability to “follow sensation,” felt the “body before mind, it is happening and the mind follows,” and had “more sensation in the whole body.”

Throughout these rehearsals I witnessed something rare and sensed. I could essentially see their energetic awareness shine through the vehicle of their bodies, and they perceived a difference. At the time, one of the dancers stated that while dancing she was not *trying* to be seen, instead was existing, and by existing she was seen. She felt so alive in her body, she did not need to vie for the attention of a viewer, and rather was connected to her body and the space around her. This experience gave her a sense of personal transparency through movement. What I witnessed as a choreographer was real, innate, raw, and somewhat primal. While working with such specific ways of moving, I suddenly began seeing myself in the dancers. After these rehearsals, one of the dancers revealed to me that through the rehearsal process, she felt as though there were layers of old emotions and experiences sloughing off, releasing with more depth each time. Interestingly enough, the practice of yoga encompasses releasing or surrendering that which no longer serves one’s highest self.

In Margot Anands book *The Art of Everyday Ecstasy*, she describes the *chakras* as the processors of energy from every experience one has in life (1998). She states: “The moment we understand our world as dynamic interplay between energy and consciousness, we begin to see life as a dance of energy in constant flux and ever-

changing forms- pulsing, expanding, and contracting” (Anand, 1998, p. 132). This dance, or rhythm of life is energy that manifests in many ways, influencing my view of dance as a way to create a container of energy that is perceived and experienced by an audience. This viewpoint makes all of the components of a creative work crucial. The choreographic form of the work (or the energetic container in which quality lives), the qualitative energy that the dancers are expressing, the coloring and fabric of the costumes, lighting and the resonance of the sound, all contribute and influence the experience one has of viewing a dance piece.

In “Better an ignis fattus/than no illume at all” sound became an integral part of the choreography with the use of verbalization, or *mantra*. In yoga, repetition of a *mantra* is a way of infusing the yoga practice with an intention, or a thought. At the beginning of the piece this notion was employed by manifesting intention through the dancers whispering, building in their minds and voices two mantras: “Better an ignis fattus than no illume at all” the title of the piece, meaning: “better to be a foolish fire than to have no flame at all.” The dancers also repeated an excerpt by Estés that was inspiration in our early rehearsals where she states: “Time alone and not very far down the road will take us to the edge we need to fall, step, or dive over” (1995, p. 403). In the excerpt, she is referring to the decent into the “wild, instinctual self,” or perhaps one’s true nature (Pinkola Estés, 1995, p. 403).

The whispering *mantra* invited the dancers to consciously set thoughts into the piece, allowing the explorations and beliefs we had worked on throughout the process to infuse the space with a desired intention for the creative work that was to occur. The experience lent itself as a meditative act, enabling the dancers to fully invest in the form

of the choreography, or the dance of transformation. In *Be Here Now*, Ram Dass quotes Murshid Samuel Lewis comments on spiritual dancing:

Spiritual dancing is that which elevates consciousness. Dancing may be said to be the movement of the body or any of its parts to rhythm, and spiritual is that which helps to make man realize that this body is really the Divine Temple. Therefore the use of sacred phrases or words or the practice of meditation before starting, are necessary. For no dance is a Spiritual Dance because it is called that; it does not mean a certain form or technique, nor a ritual, not something so esoteric that there is no understanding by performers and no communication to audience (1971, p. 78).

Through the intention we placed on the choreographic work, along with the tools and inspirations we had used in the creative process, we created a dance that elevated the consciousness. This experience facilitated the performers transcending the form of their bodies, as well as the form of the creative work through dance and performance.

However, the form of the piece proved itself to be a seemingly impossible mystery to unearth, a situation that created discomfort for me as a choreographer and viewer, as well as for my dancers who had to negotiate the many elements of the dance in a form that did not serve the greater purpose of the choreography.

From Flame to Smoke: Elusive Form

A dance work without form, even while containing content and inspiration, can never communicate a greater picture. While the movement may be captivating and the dancers may be having a felt experience, it may mean nothing to the viewer without a form that allows the content to come alive. Something that I find value in as a choreographer is bringing performers and audience members into the same *bhava* (mood), allowing a transformative experience for both. As a viewer of dance, I want to be altered and renewed upon seeing a dance piece and I have the same expectation of myself

when choreographing. For me, choreography is an honest form of communication, a way to tell stories, an offering to the experience of life, and an invitation for the audience to enter upon the same experience.

In the creation of “Better an ignis fatus/than no illume at all,” I was determined to make a work that contained a rich physicality of the quality and inspiration that my dancers and I had explored from the beginning of the process. For the first time in my choreographic experience, I was approaching my work from an experiential and qualitative place, rather than teaching the dancers phrase material and allowing expressive quality to emerge from the form of the piece. Essentially, I was reversing the process I had used for my previous works, most recently: “Moirai,” and “Dark/Light.” This new way of working was difficult for me and I discovered that I put myself in the practice of *tapas* through this method. I had stepped into unknown territory and created an internal struggle to which Dass speaks of saying:

THAT’S ONE OF THE TRAPS / IN FACT THE HIGHER YOU GET THE
HARDER YOU FALL / EACH TIME / IT’S THOSE FIERCE LIONS
GUARDING THE INNER/GATES / ALL OF THIS STUFF HAPPENS / WHEN
YOU ARE EXTRICATING / YOURSELF FROM THIS WEB OF / DESIRE
WHICH IS YOUR / EGO WHICH IS YOUR COGNITIVE / FRAMEWORK OF
THE UNIVERSE / (IT’S ALL THE SAME THING) / AND THIS
EXTRICATION / (BELIEVE ME) DOESN’T HAPPEN / WITHOUT AN
INTERNAL STRUGGLE / THIS IS CALLED TAPAS... [*sic*] (1971, p. 40).

Through struggle, the form of the piece had eluded me. I was overly persistent in trying to “figure out” how to fix the piece, implementing feedback before taking the time to reflect upon it. In a sense, I was fueling the fire, never backing down and acting out of fear, when in reality my fear was producing my greatest fear: that I would create an amorphous, uncommunicative piece of art.

My fear was the veil that covered my eyes to knowing the form that would

actualize the expressive and communicative potential of the piece. I was disregarding an important aspect of making creative work: the art of knowing when to surrender in the process, allowing information to register, cultivating the ability to actually see what was in front of me. In yoga this would be referred to as *Ishvara pranidhānā*: surrendering to the “bigger picture” (Rea, 2007). It is a concept that goes hand in hand with *tapas*, as stated in *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*: “Tapahsvādhyāyeśvarapranidhānāni kriyā yogah (translating to) Accepting pain as help for purification, study of spiritual books, and surrender to the Supreme Being constitute Yoga in practice” (Satchindanda, 2012, p. 75). In my desire to give my dancers an experience, I actually did us a disservice by acting out of fear. Through witnessing my impulsive nature, I realized that I was denying the practice of yoga in my creative process by not surrendering to the bigger picture of the choreography.

In the weeks leading up to the show, there were physical challenges that my dancers faced. In particular, “Better an ignis fattus/than no illume at all” was based on the collective build of each of the dancers energies. At this point in the process, watching the piece in rehearsals was a nebulous experience. However, I kept moving forward, and spent a considerable amount of time working on the things I could understand. The more I worked, the clearer certain aspects of the piece became, creating an imbalance in the overall piece. Due to the missing dancers in some sections, I did not have the creative insight to proceed. If I were to compare the process to the *chakras*, it was as if I was focusing so much on certain energy centers, others closed as a result. On the path to enlightenment in my creative work, there was no clear direction to traverse. I was frustrated and lost.

When my thesis committee saw the dance in a showing, they sensed my confusion and offered to help me find clarity. This, for me, was a huge test in letting go of my ego, yet time was precious and I had to surrender. At this point I had a little over a week until opening night, and only had two rehearsals with the entire cast. The process of creating “Better an ignis fattus/than no illume at all” ended up exemplifying my creative interests in *tapas*. In the last few rehearsals the piece morphed into the build it needed to serve my choreographic intent. I felt confident. Despite my newfound confidence, the following week, show week, everything seemingly fell apart and came together at the same time, demonstrating the paradox inherent in life that (as discussed earlier) Hazrat Inyat Khan believes makes up our earthly experience.

As show week began, tragic and unexpected life circumstances surprised my dancers and me, forcing us all to acknowledge the cyclical nature of life, and the uncertainty all humans must heroically face every day. This “real life” sense of uncertainty further contributed to a situation of *tapas* where the mystery of life became more apparent than ever. At this point in time, one of my dancers had entered the hospital for an emergency surgery. Additionally, another one of my dancers devastatingly lost her father and left town to be with family. This same week I also suffered the personal loss of a close family friend, a man who was practically an uncle to me. By opening night of the show *If a Snake Should Bite* half of my cast for “Better an ignis fattus/than no illume at all” had changed.

In these moments the world slows down and everything comes into perspective, forcing one to stand amidst the flames, in the seat of the fire, as the ashes fall, with nowhere to go. After having been on the outside of the piece for the entirety of rehearsals,

within 2 days of the show I was left with no choice but to step into the piece. My presence in the piece brought forward the difficulty I had endured through the creative process, contributing additional emotive dimension to the choreographic intent. Together, with fire in our hearts, the dancers and I rose above the flames, bringing a rebirth to the piece. Suddenly, “Better an ignis fattus/than no illume at all” fully actualized into the metaphor of dancing amidst the flames, serving as a means for transformation

CHAPTER V

EMBODYING THE FLAME: PERSONAL PERFORMING

EXPERIENCE, METAPHOR, AND MEANING MAKING

The symbolic field is based on the experiences of people in a particular community, at that particular time and place. Myths are so intimately bound to the culture, time, and place that unless the symbols, the metaphors, are kept alive by constant recreation through the arts, the life just slips away from them. –Joseph Campbell (Campbell & Moyers, 1988, p.59)

Myth and metaphor allow us to bridge the gap between reality and the imagination, assisting in demystifying the uncertainty of life. My creative process and work embrace this notion by trying to make sense of it, using the metaphoric language and the philosophical concept of *tapas*. In *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali* it states: “Yoga philosophy reminds us that all our knowledge is experience” (Satchindanda, 2012, p. 86). In some ways, stepping into “Better an ignis fattuus/than no illume at all” allowed me the unique opportunity to actually experience my own transformation as a choreographer in my creative group work.

“Better an ignis fattus/than no illume at all” was a difficult and vulnerable piece to perform, and the form of the piece insinuated a situation of *tapas*. It created a setting that *was* the heat or resistance, and was something that I could not have created had I been a

part of it from the beginning of the process. The creative work was both a representation and experience of transformation, making the dance an embodiment of paradox. Upon stepping into the piece, I had the realization of how difficult it was to sustain in a performance context.

From the beginning of the piece, the huddle of dancers repeating *mantras* in a whispering cadence, evoked a haunting descent into the abyss of *tapas*. Repetition of the *mantras* gave me permission to allow the piece to be transformative, a threshold that I would gracefully dive over. I recall feeling swept away by the dance, unaware of whether or not I was doing the correct sequence of material and fully relying on my dancers to carry me through the piece. This situation forced me to practice surrendering in a performance context.

I had no alternative but to embody *Ishvara pranidhānā*, the surrender I had resisted throughout the creative process. In a sense, “Better an ignis fattus/than no illume at all” was a metaphor for *Tapah svādhyāyeśvarapranidhānāni kriyā yogah*. The piece represented accepting pain as help for purification (build of heat throughout the piece), study of spiritual books (represented through the investigation in the creative process, and the *mantras*), and surrender to the Supreme Being (letting go, and trusting). As a result, the dancers and I mirrored the practice of yoga in a performance context.

Yoga philosophy and mythology illustrate a multitude of examples of growth from apparent dissolution. Destruction must take place for a new beginning to occur, and my creative work illustrates elements of heat, resistance, and destruction as a means for rebirth and transformation. The symbolism of fire as it pertains to transformation, and the placing of candles in a circle around the dancers served as a metaphor for transcending to

a higher level of consciousness. Circularity also symbolized the cyclical nature inherent in life: the birth-life-death-rebirth cycle. Through this circularity symbolizing cycles in life, we physicalized the notion that something must die out for a new beginning to occur. During the creative process my dancers and I referred to this notion as embodying both the flame and the ember simultaneously.

As the piece progressed, the build of physical and psychological heat through movement and spatial structure served as an indicator of the process of destruction and the surrender. Circular images have also historically been recognized as a reflection of the psyche, a way of analyzing one's self (Campbell & Moyers, 1988). In the case of "Better an ignis fattus/than no illume at all," the circle was symbolic for one's self, and the relationship with others in the space, all of which created a container of energy. This *mandala* (circular) of energy created a powerful space for the dance of transformation to occur.

For instance, among the Navaho Indians, healing ceremonies are conducted through sand paintings, which are mostly mandalas on the ground. The person who is to be treated moves into the mandala as a way of moving into a mythological context that he will be identifying with- he identifies himself with the symbolized power (Campbell & Moyers, 1988, p. 217).

The "symbolized power" of circularity was represented throughout "Better an ignis fattus/than no illume at all" with both the placement of candles and the dancers in space. Visually in the piece there is a moment when one dancer breaks the circle of the space as she begins to step off the edge of the stage, forcing the rest of the cast to rush to catch her, symbolic for "diving over the edge" into the abyss of one's innermost self. This represents that while one must face the fire on their own, they are never truly alone.

With candles surrounding the space and the feeling of separation from the group

in the solo sections, there was an extreme amount of exposure. As a soloist, I felt on display, vulnerable and cut open, as if all of my inner light was radiating outwardly from the circle of candles. The feeling was scary, but necessary for transformation. I felt just as I had at the Salt Dance Festival in 2013, as though my heart was breaking through my chest, completely exposed, allowing my inner light to shine through. I was overcome with a sense of transparency.

The ebb and flow between group unison sections juxtaposed against a soloist acted as a reminder that while one must face the fire of transformation alone, the group will always be there for support. It was imperative for the entire cast to go through that feeling state in a series of solos in which each dancer partook. In experiencing this unguarded performance context, the dancers and I were able to share our sense of vulnerability with one another. As a contrast to this feeling, in the group sections as a performer I felt an undeniable sense of support for the soloist, and connection to the group. During moments of group unison, I felt powerful and connected. This paradox between vulnerability and empowerment created a performance experience unlike any other I have ever encountered.

From the circle of candles in the choreography as a symbol of transformation, to the process itself, I was able to successfully create a representation as well as an experience of the philosophical underpinnings of *tapas*. During the process I was fire activating and igniting change, yet needed to rest as an ember. I needed to find my pace, yet because of my unwillingness to back down I created more struggle, ultimately contributing to the overall experience. In fact, this metaphoric fire is precisely what my work was about. The experience was *tapas*. It was the moments in life when one would

rather hide, give up, or run away. These moments are the dance of life, and no textbook can illuminate the experience, it is irrevocably human.

An example from yoga philosophy of this dance of life and paradox is represented in the myth of the deity Shiva Nataraja. In his wild dance of destruction, he is symbolic of death as well as liberation and revelation (Shanmuganathan, 2014). With his wild matted hair seemingly doing a dance of its own, his ashen covered body illustrates the sound of a beating drum, the rhythm of creation; he is engulfed in a circle of flames, representing the cyclical nature of life: birth, life, death and rebirth (Shanmuganathan, 2014). This is a metaphor that relates to my thesis work. I not only used it as inspiration for the overarching theme, but also as illumination of the movement qualities I explored with my dancers. In the myth of the Shiva Nataraja, sound, the first of the five elements, vibrated space resulting in creation of the universe while fire, recognized as encompassing the paradox of both life and death, being symbolic for destruction and a main source of life energy (Jain & Jain, 2006).

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

Becoming Smoke

Every choreographic journey for me starts in the body. It begins with the step of my foot, an undulation of my spine, the throw of my arm, or the rotation of my head. As movement uncontrollably flows from my body, I am simultaneously deeply connected with the physical form of my body and the universe. I never know where the dance is going, nor do I have visions of what it might be, but I am committed to being with the dance, seeing it through its manifest form in the instant it is performed. The cultivation of a performance experience for the dancers is just as necessary as offering a transformative experience for the audience upon viewing the dance. As a result, my commitment to understanding the potential of the dance through its form is just as important as the embodiment of the dance.

Just as fire destroys, it also gives way to new life. After the moment of performance, a dance becomes smoke, allowing opportunity for a new manifestation of creative spirit to emerge. This constant dance between creation, form, and dissolution is a way of engaging the mystery and ephemeral nature inherent in human existence through the form of dance. It teaches me to surrender in the heated and uncomfortable moments,

dancing amidst the flames.

My recent choreographic works all remain unfinished in the sense that they resolve simultaneously as they continue into another realm, exhibiting dissolution as a catalyst for a new beginning. For example: “Dark/Light” ended with the lights going out as I continued to dance outside of the circle of light I was confined to for a majority of the piece. The work “Moirai” concludes with lighting abruptly blacking out after a soloist in a pool of light reaches her hand forward, in the same way that “Dark/Light” begins. Lastly, “Better an ignis fattus/than no illume at all” completes as each dancer gently walks to the outer perimeter of the space, taking a seat amongst the candles in a meditative state, softly gazing into the performance space where the dance had just occurred. As the theatrical lights slowly fade, the only visible forms of movement left behind are flickering flames in the performance space.

In each of these choreographic works, the dance ends inseparably from a continuation that is unknown to me as a choreographer, the performer(s), and the audience. This serves as a commentary on a bigger picture: part of the mystery of life is that we never fully know what is going to happen, only that we will continue consciously evolving until our last breath. “Better an ignis fattus/than no illume at all” was a progression of each piece that preceded it. The piece was a representation of an experience of *tapas*, but it was also *tapas*. However, one can only stay in the heat for so long until metaphorically speaking, one is engulfed in the flames.

Embracing discomfort does not necessarily indicate meeting it head on, fueling the fire. Contrarily, sometimes embracing discomfort means letting it go and surrendering to it. This does not imply running and hiding, rather that there is a certain safety in

surrendering to pain, finding stillness, allowing one a chance to grow and take notice.

Arguably this is where the real challenge lies, and where the most pivotal work begins: in the surrender.

Tapah svādhyāyeśvarapranidhānāni kriyā yogah: yoga in practice is the joining of *tapas*, study, and feasibly most importantly, surrender. Through dance one can be in the practice of yoga, union. While embodying the paradox of resistance and surrender, one allows for transformation of consciousness, uniting opposites and subsequently expanding boundaries to work within and grow beyond. Dance is the only art form with the capacity to both represent and live out an experiential and energetic state as it is happening in the present moment. It puts on display the ephemeral for the observer and performer.

As a dancer embodies transformation through the performance of a piece, they energetically share that experience through the transparency of their body, uniting audience members into the same *bhava* (mood). It is the unlocked form of the choreography that allows the *bhava* to be transformative for both audience and performer. Just as life is fleeting, so is the dance. As the dancers conclude the physical form of the dance, the only remnant left is the energetic resonance they created in the performance space. An audience does not have the ability to revisit any particular moment from the dance, which forces them to surrender to the experience of viewing the dance as it forms, becoming smoke. As the dancer must let go of the dance, so must the audience, leaving behind only the feeling state, the *bhava*. Yet, how do we make meaning of all of this, allowing ourselves to become the smoke as viewers, performers and choreographers of dance?

Myth and metaphor are ways of communicating and bridging the gap between the known and unknown. In dance we give physical form to myth and metaphor by bringing energy and life to them in the moment the dance occurs. From the experience of engaging in the creative process, and seeing the dance manifest in its fullest form in front of an audience, the dancer has an opportunity to make meaning from an embodied state, creating an experience more empowering than reading a story, or gazing upon a deity. When dancers perform from an energetically conscious place, allowing themselves to become transparent, the audience too has the ability to be transformed upon viewing. Through this exchange between the performers harnessing energy, and the audience members witnessing, both encounter experiential meaning through the paradox of both witnessing and embodying.

In the most beautiful way, dance is not a concrete form, it exists in an energetic realm that never ends. As soon as a dance work is performed, it disappears, becoming like smoke, until it manifests the next time it is done. The moment is fleeting and this is the essence of dance. It captures and exaggerates each present moment, heightening the notion that we are all energy, always shifting, changing and transforming. Through dance both performers and audience members embrace the mystery inherent in life that we never fully know what will happen next. Dancers employ this notion through their bodies, while audience members are able to join that journey when a dance piece achieves the proper balance of form. This balance of form unlocks a transformative experience for both the dancers and audience members regardless of any mishaps that inevitably occur in a live performance context.

Dance engages, questions, makes sense of, and expands our understanding of how

one energetically and artistically confronts the meaning of existence. Dance employs the physical plane of existence and form, as well as the energetic plane of what we cannot see, but know exists. In this way, dance is important because it is a constant reminder of embracing uncertainty in a way that expands all participants sense of self through the vehicle of the body, in relation to the universe. It is the meeting of essence and form, where dance brings energy to one's essence, allowing that essence to come into form manifest through choreography.

AND THE FUNNY THING IS / YOU'RE STILL NOT FINISHED / AND AS FAR AS THE BUDDHIST IS CONCERNED / YOU HAVEN'T EVEN BEGUN THE TRIP / YOU'RE STILL HUNG UP ON FORM / BECAUSE HE SAYS / BABY / IT'S ALL ILLUSION / NO MATTER HOW / GROOVY IT GETS / THE PHYSICAL PLANE / IS OBVIOUSLY / AN ILLUSION / ALL A DREAM / YOU GO TO BED / AT NIGHT / AND DREAM / YOU NOTICE / ABOUT YOUR DREAMS / THEY'RE VERY REAL / AND YET THEY DON'T HAVE ANY SUBSTANCE / ON THE / PHYSICAL PLANE / THAT'S THE / ASTRAL PLANE / YOU'RE DREAMING / ON THE ASTRAL PLANE / AT THE POINT OF PURE IDEAS / SOMETIMES VERY HIGH / PHYSICISTS OR POETS / TOUCH PURE IDEA / SOMETIMES MUSIC, ART / A VASE, A HEIROGLYPH / OR SOMETHING GETS SO ESSENCY / YOU FEEL / YOU ARE TOUCHING GOD / BY BEING / IN CONNECTION WITH / THAT PIECE OF ART / BECAUSE IT'S PURE IDEA / IT'S THE IDEA OF VASENESS / ITS CAUSAL PLANE / THE MIND / AT THE CAUSAL PLANE CREATED THAT VASE / THAT PLACE OF PURE IDEA / IT'S THE PLACE WHERE YIN AND YANG MANIFEST / IT'S THE PLACE WHERE DUALITY EXISTS THE FIRST PLACE / INTO FORM FROM THE IMMANENT DUALITY IN THE UNMANIFEST / FROM THE FORMLESS YOU COME INTO THAT PLACE WHERE / THERE IS ENERGY BECOMING FORM [*sic*](Dass, 1971, p. 92).

As a dance artist, I have the unique opportunity to consciously engage in energy and form on a daily basis, shifting and shaping how I experience the world around me. In dance, one gains wisdom of this notion through constant physical questioning and practice. This approach to dance is not one of finality, rather a life's work that I am committed to

challenging and understanding, constantly inhabiting the ember and flame, seeking the process of becoming the smoke.

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