Many dancers perceive the body as a finely tuned instrument used to express an emotion or idea. From a yoga perspective, the body is viewed as a glorious temple, and each person may explore its inner splendor. The body is not used as a means to something else; each yoga posture, position, or to use the Sanskrit term, asana, is an end in itself and should be experienced as such.

The purpose of this paper is to offer a basic introduction to Hatha yoga and to examine its potential in affecting the aesthetic experience of the dancer. The paper will address three major points. First, a brief overview of yoga in general; second, an explanation of Hatha yoga; third, the significance that Hatha yoga has for the dancer.

When I was asked to write this paper my reaction was, “What do I have to offer the dancer in regard to the aesthetic experience?” While not a dancer in the formal sense, I have, however, “danced” with my yoga at times. As a practitioner, teacher, and student of Hatha yoga for the past 8 years. I have observed and worked with many dancers. The majority of these students definitely believed that Hatha yoga provided them with a fresh appreciation for their bodily being and their movement potential. The slow, relaxed, static stretching movements they executed with total awareness allowed them to discover new aspects of themselves as moving beings. In this paper I want to share some of the knowledge and insight I have gained from participating in and teaching Hatha yoga. The emphasis is not on the aesthetics of yoga per se, but on the way yoga can develop a person’s awareness and appreciation of his or her sensual bodily being.

What is Yoga?

Yoga is one of the oldest and subtlest forms of human movement discipline. It is generally believed to have originated in India three thousand years ago, although the first written text, by the Indian teacher Patanjali, wasn’t written until 400 B.C. The word yoga is derived from the Sanskrit root verb, yuj, meaning to bind, join, unite, and control. The word denotes a balanced union of mind, body, spirit within the individual, as well as a union with the larger scope of universal energy. The movement toward unity implies the harmony students of yoga begin to experience even in the earliest stages of practice. As a student writes,

...for most of my adult life and the joy that I've had a glimpse of is what being truly alive is. (Bellenger, 1978)

The purpose of yoga is not to strive for an “end”, rather it is a process of awareness that becomes part of daily life. As Lasater, a yoga teacher, observes,

...The actual techniques of bringing the individual into the process of yoga vary. But they all have the common purpose of bringing the separate self to the realization that it is not only a unique individual but also simultaneously the very essence of the universe. (Garfield, 1977)

The body is the first avenue students explore in order to experience the glorious universe within; this approach is called Hatha yoga. There are many types of yoga: Bhakti, the yoga of love and devotion; Jnana, the quest for truth and intuitive knowledge of direct experience; Karma, the yoga of daily life; and Tantra, a yoga of opposites to provide a union. There are other forms of yoga, but they are all focused on some aspect of human experience. In the case of Hatha yoga the focus is on our body and our movement (Eliade, 1969).

Introduction to Hatha Yoga

Ha is derived from the Sanskrit word meaning sun or the active force; Tha developed from the Sanskrit word moon or the passive force. Hatha yoga forms a union of the mind-body-spirit contrasting the active and passive aspects of movements. An example of this occurs when one muscle group is actively stretched, followed by a letting go or passive phase. The active and passive aspects are not just concerned with muscles but with one’s attitudes as well. Thus, one can drop or relax the shoulders, or one can let go of one’s self in the dropping of the shoulders. A mechanical exercise with results that are primarily external can be approached experientially. Such an experience has the potential to transform the whole person.

In the broadest sense Hatha yoga can be a yoking of the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual dimensions of a person. In Hatha yoga these components are experienced as a whole. When this whole experience is attained the students are performing yoga and not merely exercising their bodies. Although we will examine the mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual aspects separately, the essential point is that they are all experienced as a unity. The first component of Hatha yoga is the mental aspect, reflected in the concentration, awareness, and mood of the
asanas. Students are instructed to concentrate on the movements and become aware of the subtle language of the body. There is a difference between stretching (exercise) and experiencing stretching (yoga). For example, students may be asked to raise their arms above their heads and lower their arms. Then the students may be directed to raise their arms slowly, feeling the rotation of the shoulder joint, the temperature differences of the air as their arms move through space, and, finally, the extension or opening in their shoulders, elbows, wrists, and fingers. This awareness is facilitated in Hatha yoga by having students focus attention on the present moment, move very slowly, and, at first, close their eyes so external distractions can be filtered out. Students are encouraged to be nonjudgmental and accept themselves as they are at that moment, because the ego-thinking self, by being too critical, can pull them out of the yoga perspective.

As one student succinctly stated:

I'm beginning to understand that you have to love the posture, and if you're going to "push it," do it lovingly, tenderly. You must feel and experience what it is doing for you and go with that feeling, savor it, encompass it. (Klemmer, 1978)

This savoring of movement in the present moment provides an opportunity to experience completely the movement's rhythm, harmony, and flow. A Tibetan parable addressed this mental dimension of movement.

A man without awareness is like a carriage whose passengers are the desires, with the muscles for horses, while the carriage itself is the skeleton. Awareness is the sleeping coachman. As long as the coachman remains asleep the carriage will be dragged aimlessly here and there. Each passenger seeks a different destination and the horses pull different ways. But when the coachman is awake and holds the reins the horses will pull the carriage and bring every passenger to his proper destination. (Feldenkreis, 1973, p. 54)

A student's awareness of movement brings a different quality to the experience: only when practicing such awareness can the student distinguish yoga from exercise.

The final aspect of the mental dimension is the mood of each asana. The asanas put the body in a specific alignment, and there is an accompanying mood with each posture. For example, in the lion's pose (Simhasan) students sit on their heels with the arms extended to the knees. The posture is begun by slowly straightening the spine, opening the mouth, stretching out the tongue, elongating the whole face, and rolling the eyes upward. Once in this posture, the mood of a lion is experienced: a straight solid back, mouth opened wide, and fully stretched body. Students become aware that each being has a regal part and understand that strength that is part of their beings.

This concept of the mood has great significance for dancers, who must learn to adopt a mood and quickly change it. If students can begin by holding the mood in a stationary position and totally living it, if they were lions, this may be a facilitating step in learning to bring mood to the dance. In the last section of this paper awareness will be examined in relation to dance. As mentioned earlier, the mental dimension accompanies the physical, emotional, and spiritual components; most importantly, they are experienced as an integrated and unified whole.

The physical dimension is reflected in the postures or asanas. The asanas are explained and demonstrated in detail so students know what specific muscles are involved. Where focus concentration, and the benefits of the posture. From the start, students are told the active phase involves entering into the asana, holding the asana, and moving out of the asana. The passive or relaxed "letting go" aspect of the movement is stressed equally. The passive phase offers opportunity to relax the area just worked. It is as though one is expressing appreciation to the just-worked muscles for the stretching experience they have allowed.

The precision of the postures is important: the body must be aligned exactly to achieve the maximum benefits of the asana. This precision demands an awareness of the body while doing the postures. Many dancers have used Hatha yoga for physical stretching. By doing the postures on a regular basis, the muscles stretch out. The joints open up, and energy channels begin to develop in the body. The physical benefits alone are reason enough for dancers to become involved in Hatha yoga.

The emphasis of Hatha yoga is the feeling of the asana and not a striving for the goal of how the asana should look. Thus no matter how inflexible students are, if they properly align their bodies and work into the stretch without forcing it, their bodies will open gradually.

I have found in working with dancers that feeling the stretch can be difficult because often they are so flexible that the posture is achieved with little effort. In contrast, the inflexible person immediately confronts rightness with stretching. The essential point is that the physical posture is only important in relation to feeling.

The emotional component of Hatha yoga is integrated into the asana through breathing or, the Sanskrit term, pranayama. Students are made aware that certain tensions in the body may be emotionally related and that breathing can help release tension. Some students experience many different feelings; with the muscular stretch there often may be an accompanying emotional release. As one student stated:

All I could do was feel a sense of relief flow over my whole being and tears kept rolling down my cheeks. I wasn't crying but it seemed to be a new awareness and feeling of total relief. I had to keep wiping away tears. This seemed so strange as I was not sad but just seemed as though my body was releasing emotional energies in this manner. (Gottlieb, 1978)

As students begin to use breathing to accomplish the total stretch, there is an opening of inner space as well. Students can begin to feel comfortable with this experiential feeling—a sort of inner choreography. The openness allows individuals to move with this feeling. For dancers, it is important to be sensitive to this aspect of their beings, since movements originate from within, where they become alive. Dancers need a full range of feeling so they can use the body's total potential. Like potters who must prepare their clay just right, dancers must shape their
bodily feelings, both internal and external, into a state of preparedness so they can move with whatever feeling is appropriate for a particular dance.

Breathing is important because it reflects an emotional state. When individuals relax, their breathing usually becomes deep and smooth; when they are tense they take shallow, choppy breaths. In yoga, the act of breathing is emphasized in order to aid in releasing tightness and tension. For this reason, breathing techniques are introduced early in the course. Students are told how to breathe a complete breath: they learn that it originates from the abdominal area and moves like a gentle wave up into the chest area. It is important for students to become familiar with a complete breath so they experience its fullest potential. Students then can use whatever part of the complete breath required by a particular movement. For example, dancers may not use a complete breath, but whatever type of breathing is required, they are much more aware of their breathing and how it relates to their bodies' movement. Another technique for developing an awareness of breathing is to direct the inhaled breath to tense areas of the body, then to exhale and visualize the tension leaving the body. At this point students can almost feel the body come alive.

Breathing is also related to the spiritual dimension of Hatha yoga. The spiritual aspect is realized when the mental, physical, and emotional components are integrated through breathing. Students no longer have to concentrate on the execution but can use breathing to move slowly into the stretches. It seems almost as though students no longer direct their movements: their breathing is moving them. As the yoga movements become effortless, they grow more similar to dance. Both yoga practitioners and dancers have to be aware of technique, but just to execute a mechanical movement gives a cold appearance, and the movement appears empty. Dancers need to know not just the physical and technical aspects, but the mood, emotion, spirit, and meaning of movements to bring them alive in their bodies. Dance and Hatha yoga are very similar in this respect.

The mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual aspects of Hatha yoga may be integrated in the asanas. Students enter into the asana slowly, with their awareness totally focused on the body so they can move to the edge of their stretch, with the body in proper alignment. This ensures the appropriate muscles are being stretched. The edge of the stretch is that point where the pain just begins, or where the “sweet tension” resides in the asana. The pain becomes the teacher because it informs students of their limits. It is like a torch in the night; it offers direction and guidance for focusing awareness. Students are encouraged to become aware of the pain and to play with it. This is where breathing enters into the stretch. The body is in proper alignment, the awareness is focused on the “sweet tension,” and the student begins to move slowly into the posture by inhaling. This inhalation symbolically repeats the first breath of life, just as exhalation represents death. Thus, breathing functions as a mini life and death cycle.

As students continue to breathe into the “sweet tension” they can visualize the tension leaving the body with the exhalation. At this point various forms of visual and kinesthetic imagery can be used to assist in a more profound release of tension. Breathing allows students to penetrate into their deepest levels and open themselves physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually.

The emphasis with this approach is not that students should achieve some ideal asana, but that they should experience where they are with the asana, even becoming students who can’t touch their toes are doing Hatha yoga.

The following statement by a student clearly summarizes this integration:

“I stretched more than I ever have. I felt pain but I also experienced pleasure. While stretching, on the exhale I lowered my body and bent my elbows. While doing this my mind and body were very peaceful. Although it was painful I experienced it as a part of pleasure. I developed a deeper insight into what pain really is. You can’t have one without the other. They are one and the same thing. The only difference is how you perceive it.” (Hirschorn, 1975)

The Yoga of Dance

Hatha yoga is a process, and is not goal oriented. It is timeless because awareness is focused in the present moment; this means that no one movement is more important than another. Each movement or asana is an end in itself. For example, unlike dancers who must continually link together a series of movements to express a feeling to others, yoga students are only concerned with their personal choreography. In Hatha yoga dancers can immerse themselves in the present moment of the asana without being concerned with audience reaction. I have discovered, however, that some dancers have difficulty setting aside their attitude of “performing” for others. When they finally transcend this performance attitude their movements take on a deeper quality.

Hatha yoga may help dancers concentrate on the present moment. This concentration is important because dancers must continually change moods from one moment or movement to the next. An awareness of a mental and physical center is essential in Hatha yoga. Students are encouraged to gather themselves in the “now” moment and balance internal and external awareness so they can enter into the asana. Obtaining the centered, balanced position at the start of each yoga session provides students with a reference point from which to begin movement. This centered position also is important because students can consciously put themselves in a space they have created. So often in daily life we lose that control; for this reason establishing the center is like coming home to the body. As a student noted:

“I am experiencing more self-acceptance. I look forward to the time that I have to myself in yoga. I value the experience of feeling centered. It feels like my many “selves” come together; check things out with each other, accept each other, and blend into one whole for a time!” (Bouma, 1978)

Hatha yoga provides students with an opportunity to give themselves the time and attention they deserve. Although this point appears obvious, it is amazing how few people give themselves this time. Because so much is demanded of the body, it needs attention to relax and recharge. The focus of attention in Hatha yoga is on the self. Students use their awareness to scan the body and listen to
its language in order to determine what needs to be stretched, strengthened, relaxed, or massaged. This determination is especially important after dance workouts where the body may have been pushed too hard and dancers need relaxing techniques. Hatha yoga asanas are limited to a set pace and are almost always stationary. This stationary position eliminates many of the variables with which dancers must contend and allows students to enter into the movement and to experience subtle aspects of the body such as energy flow and mood. Once this awareness is obtained in a stationary position, dancers can begin to integrate it with their movements.

A key point is that Hatha yoga movements originate from the temple within. Movements must be felt and experienced internally, then they can be allowed to move out through the body. In yoga the person expresses the body, in contrast to expressing ideas or feelings in dance. Because movements come from the person's core they have deep feeling.

The development of this internal source encourages dancers to sustain the mood of the dance, as well as to feel the amplitude, contraction, and expansion of the movement. As dancers explore their various levels and dimensions they find it increasingly easy to actualize these feelings while dancing.

In summary, Hatha yoga provides an integrated approach for appreciating the body and its movements. As students learn the language of the body they can begin to experience subtle dimensions that can become part of their movement repertoire. With the awareness and consciousness Hatha yoga requires, dancers can begin to experience new dimensions of the aesthetic experience. The attitude that the body is a temple has limitless ramifications for dancers, and, more importantly, for human beings who are dancers.

References
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