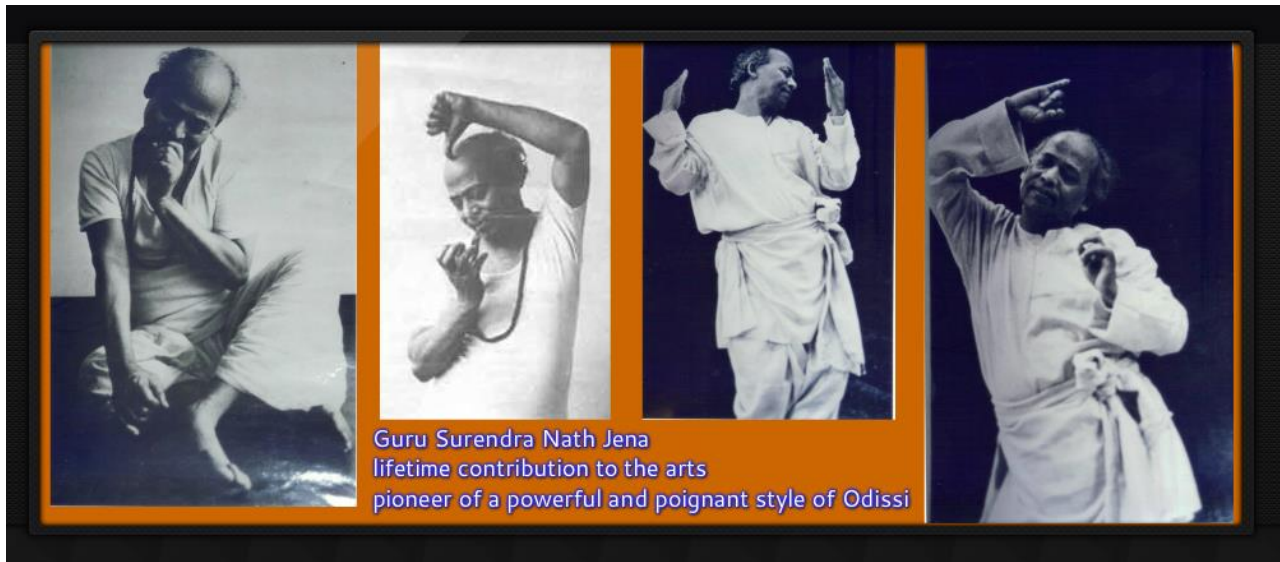


The Quintessence of Odissi: Guru Surendra Nath Jena's Courage to Lead

by his son, Nirmal Chandra Jena



Photos: Avinash Pasricha, Delhi

My father was a maverick, a fearless pioneer with every reason to be frightened of the world that imposed on him, but he was not. He had a vision steeped in philosophy, values and rituals and his vehicle was Odissi dance, a timeless, ageless expression borne out of the depth of consciousness and worship. He embellished this with a commanding scientific base consisting of theory, technique, music, poetry and illustrations.

He invested his life in the arts and created dance and music masterpieces. *Eka eka mala deli gunthita jatane kebala pindhi paribe kala sebi janee* (an excerpt from his poetry) - *I have created this garland of jewels with great care, and only the chosen can be adorned with it. Odisara shilpa chitra jete dina thiba aei kalara satyata je banchiki rahiba: for as long as the sculptures and the paintings of Odisha are visible, the truth of Odissi will remain; for as long as there is deep inquiry, the truth will be revealed again and again; and, for as long as the rituals in the temples are practised, the journey will continue to inspire.* Guruji went on his sacred journey to reach *Sattwika*, the pinnacle of creativity which eludes most. My mother, Kumudini's support throughout this journey gave my father the courage and the confidence.

I live in a distant land, in Sydney Australia, a land with a compelling history spanning 40,000 years. It has nurtured my spirit and awakened me to the universal relevance, power and resilience of my father's art and philosophy. It is my life and I have presented, performed and taught many across Australia and other countries. There are many worthy ambassadors of my father's Odissi across several countries and each brings to this genre unique capabilities. And there are those who have fervently supported and patronised my practice. My wife, Chitrita, and I have enjoyed an enduring partnership, without which I could not have invested in my artistic journey.



Dance as Meditation

My father wrote *Su Alankruta Naisargika Marma Sparsita, Tejadipta Nritya Bhangi uccha Balistita - it is heavenly practice to touch and activate the essence within, its aura is for the seekers of truth.* He adopted this heavenly practice from the temples of Odisha, created the form of the dance from the sculptures and the paintings of Odisha, and borrowed the Vedic and Tantric rituals of the temples to form the content of the dance - dance is the real temple in making. If the human body is the temple, our soul is the deity. To realize it, outer ritual must activate the inner ritual and one must look inward through intense *Sadhana* to reach a higher state. My Odissi is my *Sadhana* and my *Aradhana*.

Eastern philosophy has guided the mind for millenniums, its vastness and gravity eclipsing political, cultural, economic and religious turbulence. The architects in the Vedic era profoundly understood the value of human life, its higher order purpose, its intelligent standing and its connection to all living things. *Dharma* or

virtuous living, *Artha* or conscious earning, *Kama* or sensibly fulfilling our desires and *Mokshya*, spiritual awakening or realizing the existence of the divinity in us, this is the essence of human existence, the foundation of our civilization and the philosophy that ought to guide us through life.

Similarly, in the world of creativity, the infinite spirit in us can be activated through a similar journey. Bharat Muni in 1st century BCE wrote of *Angikam* (creating and mastering a technique using our infinite capability of body, mind and emotions), *Wachikam* (using our expression of thought, through speech, voice, song, chant, music, bols and so on to convey the message to others or evolve internally) and *Aharyam* (beautifying our creativity through extraordinary tools like costume, jewellery, makeup, set design, lighting and so on). *Sattwikam* emerges when the basic state of



Guru Nirmal Jena teaching at NIDA 2018
Photos: Rudolf Rindler

creativity evolves into a higher state of consciousness of the eternal self, separating matter and material from the spirit.

So where are we today in our creative and artistic practice of Odissi and Indian arts? We have adorned the world stage with technical wizardry and fanfare in the process of breathing life into our lost art forms, after centuries of political oppression and cultural vandalism. We have built heroic and everlasting profiles of individuals and produced works of art to mesmerise audiences and capitulate to Western ideologies of the performing arts. We have created modern performance venues to foster entertainment and the thundering sound of applause for the colonised mind.



Nirmal Jena

Photo: Randwick City Council, NSW Australia

Universal and meditative artistic practice remains in its infancy. In India, the revival of Indian classical arts deviated from the path of self-discovery, perhaps inadvertently. But my father never did. He turned against the tide, wading through infinite challenges, to reach the origins of our sacred arts. He was resolute that modern societies, governed by dehumanising agents, urgently need the wisdom

and the essence of our past to build a better and more resilient future. Living in India and then in Australia has led me to the same destination. I yearn to share the depth and truth of my artistic practice with those willing to inherit this garland of jewels by surrendering to it as a lifelong pursuit and investing in it to reach perfection.

Dance Education

The National Institute of Dramatic Art (NIDA) is an iconic arts teaching institution in Australia and the Asia Pacific region. Each year, thousands apply but only a few are selected to receive training in acting, directing and related arts genres. The students hope to star in future film blockbusters, their names plastered in cyberspace. Fame and fortune beckon. When Gavin Robins, Head of Movement in NIDA, decided to incorporate my teaching, I was at a loss, initially. I asked myself, *where can I start? What can I teach?* The fast rhythms of Indian dance, the hand and facial gestures and engaging dance sequences can be taught by anyone with basic training in Indian arts.

I began with the philosophy that has inspired and shaped the Indian civilization. I started by narrating the encounter between Alexander the Great and a Vedic monk in 326 BCE. After conquering many lands and people with his large army, Alexander reached the banks of the Indus River, pondering how to penetrate deeper into India. One of his soldiers noticed a half-naked man, with matted locks, an ashened body, sitting silently on a rock. Others gathered and soon Alexander came to the scene.

The monk opened his eyes and asked the onlookers who they were and where they had come from. Alexander came forward and said *I am Alexander the Great from Macedonia, I have conquered many lands and have come here with my army to conquer India, and who are you and what are you doing sitting silently on a rock?* The monk laughed and said *I am a monk, and I have no name, I am part of this nature, I do not seek an identity for this self that I am, I am meditating to conquer my mind.*

This time Alexander laughed and asked *what is conquering of the mind?* The monk responded: *I sit here in the woods and meditate to conquer the impulses of this human nature, produced by the human mind; Mother Nature provides me with everything I need, the trees provide me with food, the rivers provide me water, the heaven is my shelter... I do not take anything I don't need, not even a leaf. I meditate to conquer this mind from which arises the human ego and its desire to control others. I conquer the greed, the selfishness, and I try not to even step on an ant accidentally. Every living and non-living thing has its place and purpose. I do not pass a judgement on anyone; I simply withdraw inside me and meditate to reach the point of unity with the self so that I am one with the self/soul which prevails in all living things.*

So tell me Warrior, what have you conquered so far? You and your marauding soldiers must have left millions dead, innocent people defending their way of life, thousands of women raped and robbed of their honour, millions of orphans left to die, the farm lands you crushed and burnt, which provided food and shelter, how will they be replenished? So tell me warrior what have you conquered so far after spending 20 years of your life away from your loved ones?

Not long after the encounter, most of his army decided to return home. On the way, the heroic Alexander died from contracting malaria, the bite of a mosquito.



Nirmal Jena, NIDA 2018
Photo: Rudolf Rindler

The NIDA students seemed disarmed by this story. They were curious about what would follow and I was inspired by their enterprise.

I began by explaining the foundations of the practice of Indian classical dance, especially the Jena style of Odissi - the dance of the inner and

the outer, intertwined to project the depth of the inner journey while disengaging from the ego. As Guru Surendra Nath Jena wrote in his poetry, *Atmika Prerana Dei Thibaru Bhaskarjya, Sulabha Bhangire Pari Purnita Swandarjya - the spirit, the soul is the driving force behind my divine creativity.*

A while after Guruji's passing, I realised why his choreography begins with a ritual consisting of geometric patterns, squares, triangles and circles in different shapes and sizes. For example, in *Bhadreswari* and *Archana Puri*, two dance items, the rituals are unique in terms of rhythm and theme. These geometric patterns, also represented in many philosophy and theology discourses, ensure universal relevance and serve to unite diverse peoples and traditions. I feel Guruji deliberately punctuated his art with such hidden or deeply embedded elements, which become evident only to those who dive repeatedly and deeply into his art.

His work combines the two philosophical traditions of India, the Vedic and the Tantric. The square represents the body and the mind, the triangle, the energy field, the *Kundalini* sitting coiled at the base of the body which must be raised with breath and vibration, *Spandana*, and then engaged through the dance to reach the eternal circle or the self or the soul or the spirit or the God, whatever an individual considers the ultimate. After this ritual at the beginning, every dance then progresses to an oblation, an offering to the collective spirit, very much aligned with the practice of the *Devdasis* in the temples of Odisha.

Interestingly, the three motifs of Odissi - the square or chawk, the triangle or tribhanga and the circle – are evident in the statue of Jagannath since the hands are in square position, the face carved as a triangle and the all observing eyes, circular.

The role of the *Devdasis* in the temples of Odisha was unique. They represented feminine energy. They were the conduits between the gods and the priests. Their unique offering of dance to Jagannath was done with 16 cycles of Vedic pooja, called *sodosopachar* pooja. The *devdasis* also served in the Panchamakara offering, in Tantric pooja, to Jagannath.

The Vedic pooja was intended for all worshippers to witness and it occurred in the day time, while the Tantric pooja was held at night, only in the presence of the *Devdasi* and the *Rajguru*. These unique practices were designed to help focus restless minds and penetrate the sub-conscious to achieve *Yoga* or union with the soul. My father instructed me to dive deeper and explore the layers of meaning which inform his art. Initially my practice was superficial, but as I dived further and further, I found the precious pearls. With each dive, my body was churned, my mind free and the practice, richer. My guru's repertoire is my treasure and I am willing to hand it over to those deserving and searching.

Foundational Repertoire and fundamental elements of the Jena Style of Odissi

- a. **Matrupranam** – an invocation and offering to the mother energy with a unique geometry of Tantra to begin the journey, which ends with worshipping *Dasmahavidyas* – here the dancer or worshipper propels from the centre towards ten directions and salutes the infinite deva/self within.
- b. **Konark Kanti** – illustrates the foundational form or technique of the Jena style, inspired by the Konark temple and its many reliefs in dance poses, highlighted in the middle of this choreography, where the dancer presents twelve life size *Shalabhanjikas* from the

stillness of the square to the moving triangles, forming shapes and figures that require tremendous control of the body and the mind.

- c. **Swaprabhasrit** – *Swara, prana, bhava/bhangi* and *tala*, the tools for elevating the *Chitta* or consciousness for the practitioner/the dancer as well as the audience or onlookers – this was the ultimate purpose of the *devdasis* dance offerings in the inner and outer sanctums of the temples. Guruji's creativity was entirely awashed with the light of the soul, each piece beginning with a ritual of squares, triangles and circles representing the Vedic and the Tantric tradition of India, presented as a cohesive whole.
- d. **Bhava Manthana** – we are deep, complex and emotionally intelligent beings; abhinayas are creative expressions of our worldly emotions but to experience the spirit, one must practise inner *manthana* (churning) and *sadhana* focused on *aradhana* through deep inquiry about the purpose of our existence. This is the beginning of our inner journey from the body to the mind, from the mind to the sub-conscious, from the sub-conscious to universal consciousness. When we engage with our body, we focus the mind to work on the breath and vibration (*spandana*), to find the *brahmagranthi* where the *kundalini* is locked away at the base of the body; after freeing the *kundalini* we raise it in the *susumna* central channel so that it climbs upward by unlocking all the *chakras*. This was written by Bharat Muni in the *Natya Shastra*, *stambhah swedotha romanche swarabhango tha bepathu vaivarnya masru pralaya etyastho satwikah smruta*. The eight bodily experiences in each chakra is called the *Asta satwika Bhava* or the overwhelming feelings and ecstasy generated as the *kundalini* rises. When the *kundalini* enters the *Muladhara* chakra at the base of the body, we experience *Stambha*, almost a numbing of the lower body. When it enters *Swadhistana*, at the base of the genitals, we experience *Sweda*, perspiring profusely though without any physical activity; when it enters *Manipura* at the naval, we experience *Romanch*, the hair in our body stands up because of the unusual sensation; when it enters *Anahad chakra* or the heart region, we feel *Bipathu* or bewilderment, represented with two triangles, one pointing upward and the other, downward. When the *Kundalini* enters the *Vishudhi Chakra* in the throat, one becomes speechless *Swarabhanga* and as it enters the *Agyan chakra*, between the eyebrows, we see *Vivarna*, a multitude of colours and the light of the universe, referred to as *HiranyaGarbha* by Vedics and *Brahmayoni* by Tantrics. These are references to the third eye or the eye of the elevated inner mind. When the *kundalini* or consciousness penetrates the *Hiranyagarbha* or *Brahmayoni*, we reach god and here, we simply cry, *Asru*, at *bindu chakra*.

As mentioned in the *Eshavasyo Upanishad*, *hiranayayena patrena satya saphitam mukham, the face of the truth lies hidden behind this golden orb or the Hiranyagarbha, which is the eternal self, seen as a spotless moon*. Reaching this point is *yoga* or union.

Beyond it is the door to *Mukti* or liberation from the repeated cycle of birth and death. Here, one is no longer in doubt of the spirit's existence and reaches *Pralaya* or *Samadhi*. This is detailed in the *Natya Shastra* and informed Guruji's philosophy.

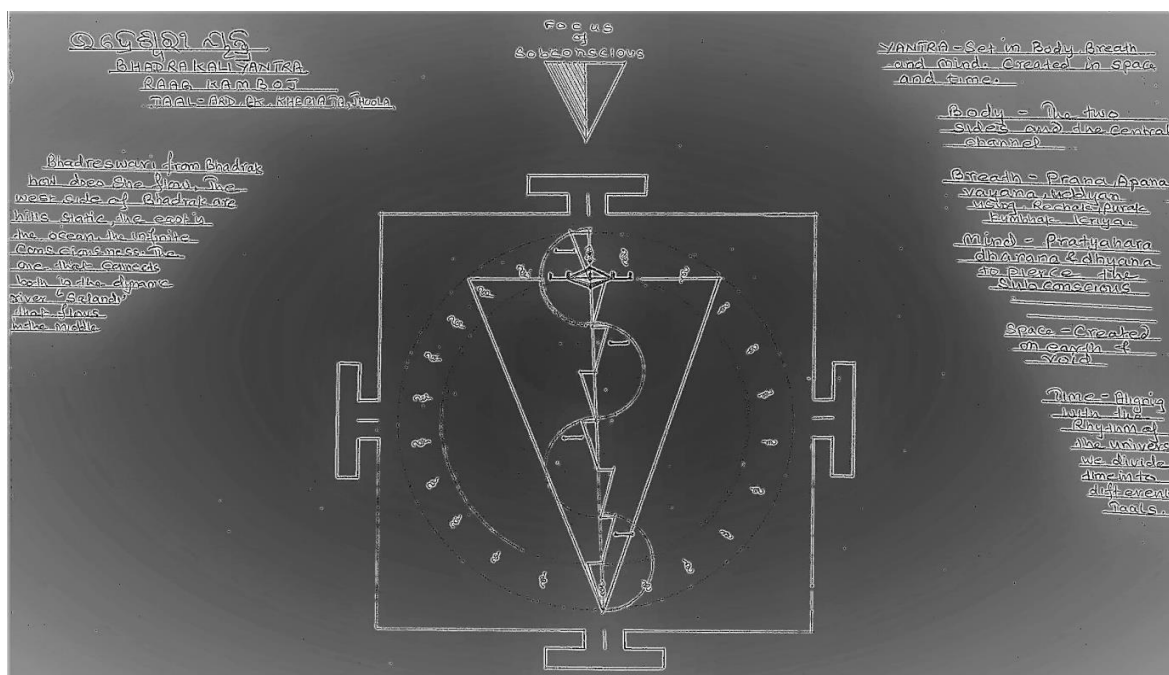
These elements and the four doors to liberation (*Sadhana pada* or door to practice; *Bibhuti pada* or door to brilliance or super natural powers; *Samadhi pada* or door to

realization; and Kaivalya pada, door to liberation) are also mentioned by Patanjali in Yogasutra. This practice is called *Astanga Yoga - Yama Niyamasana Pranayama Pratyahara Dharana Dhyana Samadhaya Astavangani*.

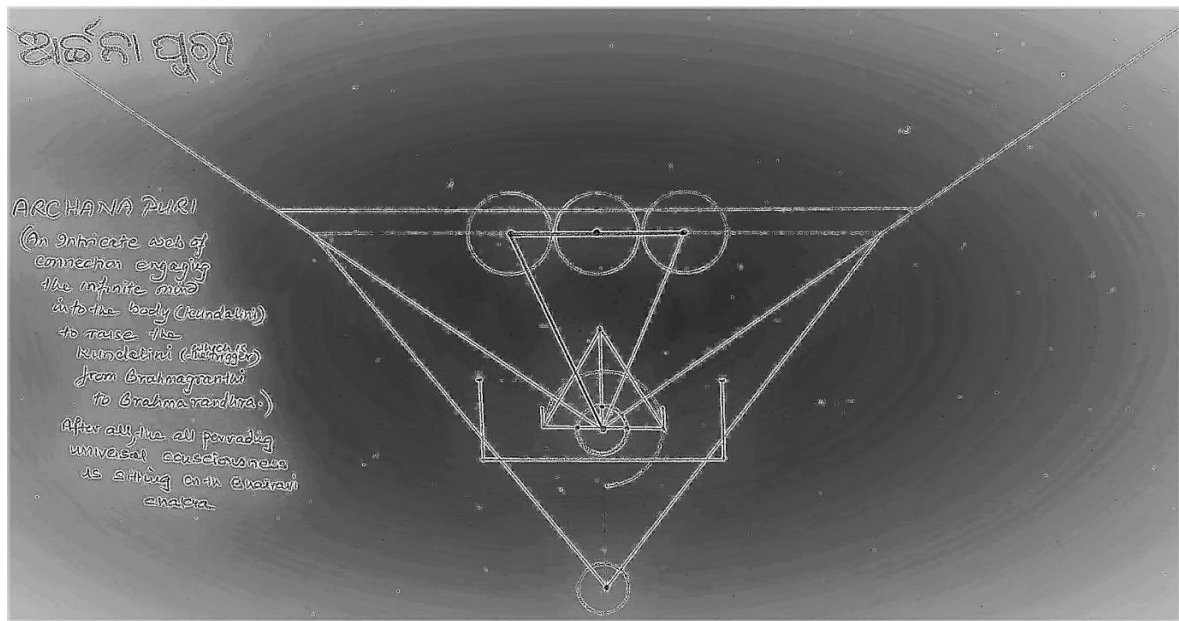
- e. **Chhaya Darshan** – another transformative choreography by Guruji punctuated in the middle with 32 sitting sculptures, beginning with the ritual of swastika, symbolising timelessness locked within the time bound body and a revelation of light and darkness. The dance concludes with an inspiring sloka as a celebration of life - *nityautsavo bhavetesam, every day, every moment is a celebration of life, live it with integrity and a higher order purpose as this present moment will not return*.
- f. **Prana Pooja** – In life, we need to walk the delicate balance - centre and harness the prana (breath) ceaselessly flowing in and out of the body, engage the mind, control emotions, character in check, belief intact and creativity complete. In this dance pooja, *Bhadreswari* walking the *minadandi*, the center line of the fish, represents the fact that our kundalini energy flows through the centre, the spine. In the ritual, geometric patterns are drawn on the floor, splitting the triangle in the middle and following the centre straight line; then, a circle is drawn around it. This calls us to walk the sacred line to reach the sacred self by repeatedly reciting *O Divine, riding on the breath, I engage and walk the center line, from Brahmagranthi to Brahmarandhra, to penetrate the sub-conscious, I create this Tantric ritual in space and time*. The two complex geometrical ritual shapes in these dance items using space (earth and ether) and time (rhythm) are unique to the Jena style of Odissi dance and powerful meditations for everyone to experience. At same time, the ritual can activate the inner journey, with each breath awakening and evoking the Kundalini and the mind stilled from its restlessness; the dancer moves in this intricate pattern to reach the self. This experience is only for the seekers of the spirit and can only be taught to evolved souls.

The drawings below, extracts from my unpublished book *Atman is Brahman*, are representations of Guruji's rituals embedded in his choreography and music.

Bhadreswari Yantra



Archana Puri Yantra



Guruji's Music Composition

The original music composed for most of his choreography erupted from his imagination, the same intelligence that led him to his dance. It is common for classical dancers and gurus in India to choreograph to music produced by others. Guruji and I, both trained in vocal and instrumental music, felt our dance cannot be governed by the parameters of music. There must be a natural synergy. In this way, Guruji ensured the primacy and uncorrupted creativity of his Odissi, the light of a true guru. His music ebbs and flows, adjusting to the mood and emotions of his dance choreography. For this reason, during presentations of Guruji's dance to live music, it is imperative the accompanying musicians project the depth and breadth of Guruji's art, beyond rhythms, notes and ragas.

In fact, the word *raga* comes from the word *ranja* which means the ecstatic bliss of the kundalini. This can envelope the body, the mind and from there, one reaches the self. Sarangdev of Sangeet Ratnakar wrote *chaitnyaum sarba bhutanam vivrutam jagadatmanah nada brahma tadanandama dwitiamupasmahe* - we worship the sound supreme, that incomparable bliss, which is inherent in all creatures and is manifested in the phenomenon of this universe. *Chakram sahasra patram brahmarandhre tu sudha dharam* - O the eternal self, the infinite mercurial moon, you are witnessed in the Sahasrara chakra at the crown opening of the human head.

Where to from here?

Myriad forms of worship, complex rituals, intricate webs of philosophy, conflicting ideas and ideals, disparate values, different views, many religions within a religion, can be confusing and destabilising. Yet, some remain steadfast and pursue their chosen way of life and values

with singularity. I believe the essence of India's philosophy and as embodied in Guru Surendra Nath Jena's dance art, is like a scintillating diamond with many faces, the many faces of a single value system, but it is still one solid diamond.

Despite the confusion and conflicts in our world today, Guruji's dance of light and transformation offers strength and liberation. Often, I find myself asking many questions as I observe humanity..... What is the purpose of a *Yagya*? Why burn so much wood and create so much smoke? Why engage in so many intricate rituals in temples which waste water, fruit, flowers, ghee and milk when there are so many hungry souls just outside the temples? What was the purpose of a *devdasi* wearing a *tahiya* on the back of the head? Why Odissi dance features tribhanga and chauka and not another shape? Why a Brahmin must have a tuft of hair on the back of the head? Why does Goddess Kali wear a garland of skulls and not beads? Why are Krishna's feet crossed in most of his statues? Why does he play a flute and not a shehnai? Why does classical music only have 7 major notes, not 10 or 20?

There are answers but concealed and which only emerge from deep inquiry and by shedding ignorance, ego, mediocrity and blind faith. I believe Guruji's art, as a vehicle of self-realisation, can only be practised by those with an open and inquiring mind, those with intellectual capabilities and those willing to dive deeply into the universe within, without fear and apprehension.

Interestingly, in my journey so far, I am bemused with the interest, albeit tokenistic at times, in Eastern values and practices in the West and the insatiable appetite in the East for Western materialistic pursuits and notions of success. I am convinced the world is poised for an electrifying catalyst across all mediums which will rekindle our search for meaning, purpose, creativity and the truth. For me, Guruji's dance is that medium, a beacon of hope and light which I cherish.



Photo: Rudolf Rindler

Jabala Darshan Upanishad proclaims *Shivamatmani Pasyanti Pratimasu Na Yogina Agyanam Bhavanarthaya Pratima Parikalpita - the soul is God and those who have not reached this level of consciousness, remain focussed on material and physical manifestations.*