

A Guru's Message "Be honest with your body"

Guru Nana Kasar lives and teaches in Delhi, at Triveni Kala Sangam. His teaching adheres to the strictest classical traditions. GITANJALI KOLANAD, herself a dancer, filed this report to SRUTI on her guru's key message.

For those of us fortunate enough to be his students, the charm of his manner and the liveliness of his speech work together to inspire enthusiasm, hard work, and perhaps most important, a simple delight in nature, then in dance. In Sanskrit, which has a word for everything, it is called sareera dharma. Through a wealth of expressive imagery, through the imagination, he awakens the body to the fulfilment of its natural ability. His sane, simple teachings will benefit any dancer, of any style. Though we can't all be his students, we all deserve his wisdom. Here it is— just as he dispenses it in class. Read and enjoy. "Be honest with your body." What do I mean by that? Once I was teaching a very senior dancer and I said this to her. She was shocked. 'What do you mean?', she said, 'I have been studying this dance for sixteen years or more, dedicated myself to it. Isn't that sincere and honest effort?' She was quite insulted until I explained it to her. Take one adavu. Tei ya tei hi. Two steps forward, weight on right heel, left heel, then up, on both heels, both legs straight, then jump. Both feet flat. That noise, of the full weight of the body on both flat feet, that sound, will tell you if you have been honest with your body. Or if you have held something back. Cheated. Prepared yourself for the next adavu instead of concentrating fully on this one. Give each adavu what it deserves. That is what I mean, 'Be honest with your body'

The body has joints. Hip joints, ankle joints, knee joints, wrist, elbow, neck. Why not use them? What is the purpose of dance? It is not to break the body and put it back together in some new way. It

is not to go against the body. No. It is to use the body to create the grace, the beauty. And how can there be beauty if there is strain, tension, pain? Dance is not for that. Go with the flow of the adavu. See — where is the balance? Listen to the drum syllables. Where is the emphasis? Is it on the first beat, the second and the fourth, or the third? Each adavu has its own emphasis. The drummer plays it differently. He should get the cue from you. Balance is the key. In the araimandi position, you are centred, balanced on both heels. You raise one foot — how? Take your whole weight, sink into the other foot. Relax the knee. relax the hip. Then stamp. Where is the weight? It shifts. There, you are centred again. Always come back to that.

When you dance like this, there is no pain, no effort for the araimandi position. On the contrary you'll feel uncomfortable if you ever leave it. You will feel the pleasure of each movement, how it flows, how it changes. Then you will never feel happy unless you achieve that. You will never give it up, and it will never give you up. That is dancing. Otherwise you are just a puppet on a string. Be aware. Be free.

Karma — Vikarma — Akarma. Here is this dancing. It is difficult. It is really hard work. Karma. But you approach it with interest, enquiring how to do it better, putting more effort, trying, trying. Work with interest — Vikarma. What happens? It ceases to be difficult. It becomes easy, effortless, a delight. It ceases to be work. Akarma. Isn't that the case?

Vinoba Bhave had a beautiful illustration for this. Your work is a heavy burden. Like a big log of wood. But you apply yourself to it, with your whole heart. Your interest is the spark that lights the heavy log. What happens? The spark of your interest burns the log of work, creating beautiful fire, bright and warm. Dancing should be like the fire, not like the log of wood. If it is a burden to you, it

will be a burden to the audience.
Continue with such .practice till
you achieve ease, grace, — joy! At
the end, only ashes. This is the
stage of real maturity for the artist.
Dance itself is transcended. It
becomes a spiritual experience,
yoga, if you want to call it that.
And the dancer becomes a
philosopher. So remember these
simple equations: Karma +
Vikarma = Akarma; log + fire =
ashes; hard work + interest = ease,
grace, joy.

Who am I to say all this, you may
ask. I can confidently reply: 'I am
the disciple of Chokkalingam
Pillai.' He taught originally at
Kalakshetra. Once some press
people asked Chokkalingam Pillai:
'Don't you have any male
students?' And he replied, 'Yes, I .
have one, with perfect angasuddha.
He is teaching in Bombay.' That
was me. So you see I have every
right to say it. Moreover, I have
been a dancer. I have taught for the
past how many years. And I have
observed. I have not been afraid to
see what is good, even in a bad
dancer. There is always something
good. I have observed that, and
accepted that, and learned from
that. So now I can pass this on to all
my students.

So the class continues. "Here^" he says,
"make your arm like a rope, loose,
loose. "And: "Here the leg goes back,
stretched like the string of the kite,
neither bent nor straight." He uses the
thattikalli to illustrate another adavu,
"Drop like this," he says, letting it slip
between his fingers, but quickly
catching it, "catch yourself on your
toes. Bend, bend, relax!" He is ready
with an image, ready with encourage-
ment, ready to watch you try again.
Finally, you get it right. "AHHHH.
Hear that sound. There, you were
honest with your body. Good!"

--- Gitanjali Kolanad ---

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