

Name: Dr. Andrea Mantell Seidel

Title (Lecture/Demonstration): Rhythmic Sacred Movement: A Pathway to Higher Consciousness

Bio: Dr. Andrea Mantell Seidel is Professor Emeritus of Dance, Associate Professor of Religious Studies, Florida International University. She is trustee of Eleanor King's choreographic legacy and artistic director of the critically acclaimed Isadora Duncan Dance Ensemble. Dr. Seidel has taught, lectured, and performed as a soloist throughout the US and abroad, including Goethe Festival, St. Petersburg, Russia; Kennedy Center, Washington; International Tanzfestival, Germany; WDA, CORD, SDHS conferences, Hong Kong Dance Academy. She is a recipient of over 70 state and national grants, NDEO's Visionary Award, and Fulbright Senior Scholar award. She is the author of *Isadora in the 21st Century: Capturing the Art and Spirit of the Dancer's Legacy* (McFarland, 2015) and articles on sacred ritual and early modern dance.

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1. Dance and Spirituality

We are focusing in this conference on dance and spirituality. We might then ask how does dance operate as a potent vehicle for spiritual awareness and what are the characteristics of spirituality? Generally, we might briefly define spirituality as a non-intellectual sense of oneness or connectedness to something greater than oneself—nature, the cosmos, or God. It is a state that one might characterize as transformative, non-intellectual, as a sense of heightened aliveness or consciousness. Psychologist Abraham Maslow referred to this sense of aliveness as a "peak experience that involves a fullness of both the body and the mind." Buddhists refer to this heightened mental alertness as "mindfulness," emphasizing that it is deeply rooted in the body. How is it that dance facilitates a spiritual state of higher consciousness? In the act of dancing, we are highly focused on the sensations arising in the body; we are sensitive to its subtle movements, to the sound of the breath, to the musculature, to the nervous system. When we are fully focused on the body and its sensations, we can connect more deeply to the emotions. Conscious dancing then encourages us to pay attention, to shine the light of

awareness on these sensations. The mind in other words, becomes 'full' of experiences and sensations found in the body.

2. Dance as a Kinesthetic, Sensory Experience Facilitating Mind/Body Integration

So rhythmic movement can promote a mind/body/spirit integration integral to the cultivation of a transformative spiritual state. It is a tool for activating what Isadora Duncan referred to as the "motor in the soul." When we turn on this motor, we ignite the flame of inspiration and aspiration that can transport us into the vast inner sky of our divine self.

Dance and movement are kinesthetic, sensory experiences. The experience of conscious dancing allows one to experience and flow through more senses than one could while sitting in meditation for example. While we were taught in school that we have only five basic senses there are many more. Some of the senses related to dance, for example, include the [kinesthetic sense or movement of body parts \(proprioception\)](#) and [sense of balance \(equilibrioception\)](#). By going into our bodies more deeply and exploring these sensations, we are getting out of our minds and can begin to experience a natural rhythm and flow, more detachment from the ego, more freedom from the heaviness of our worries and preoccupations and our sense of separateness. Movement roots us in an experience of embodiment, a direct and truthful kinetic experience that transcends words which are limiting, and thus, it possesses the ability to capture the ineffable feelings of awe that accompany spiritual states. The power and potency of dance, or rhythmic, patterned movement is that it animates and engages the *whole* body not just parts as in music, theater, or language. Dance and movement are unique among the arts in that body IS the instrument, not the paint and canvas or the violin or the words of a poem. As rhythmic movement engages multiple senses, it can be a powerful tool for bypassing the rational, thinking left brain that gets mired in its preoccupations or afflictions so that we can more easily access the higher Self and reside in a state of metaawareness that I prefer to call "beingness."

3. Movement is the Essence of Life

Movement is the essence of life. It is the pulse and flow of blood moving through arteries and veins. The breath itself is a wave of rising and falling motion. Nature itself moves in waves and arcs. As we sense and feel this basic wave of motion moving through us and in us, we can connect to ocean waves, to the golden aspen vibrating in the fall, to the arcing flight of eagles in motion. So, movement

connects us to the rhythmic flow of life and to the order, harmony and rhythm inherent in nature and the cosmos. It is in nature that we see, feel and experience the majesty of creation, its inherent order, harmony and rhythm. When we sense and feel these waves within us, we not only connect to the harmony and order of nature but to the harmony and order within us. Rhythm and music help bring continuity to the psychic energy through their predictable, repetitive patterns, like in the recitation of a mantra. The mind and body are then free to ride on the crests of the musical waves and harmoniously join in the invisible wavelike cosmic energy.

4. The Multiverse: A Symphonic, Vibratory Wave of Sound, Motion, and Light

Some of you may be familiar with the figure of Nataraj, or Shiva in his incarnation as the cosmic dancer who dances the world in and out of existence. A statue of Nataraj sits outside the huge Hadron collider in Switzerland, one of the premier physics research institutes. Physicist Fritjof Capra, author of *The Tao of Physics*, explains that **according to quantum field theory, Shiva's dance of creation and destruction is the basis of the very existence of matter. Every subatomic particle and all-natural phenomena perform this pulsating energy dance of creation and destruction.** Ancient East Indian *rishis* or sages intuited that the universe is an ocean of vibration or *spanda*. In other words, the Rishi's perceived that at a fundamental level, the universe or multiverses is made up of symphonic, vibratory waves of sound, motion, and light that form the essence of matter and is the primordial substance from which our universe was created.

In modern scientific terms, the universal pulsation of the Absolute can be understood as a "holomovement," a term coined by British theoretical physicist David Bohm. Some theories of quantum physics postulate that the smallest particles are vibrating strings. Superstring theory holds that billions upon billions of unseen strings pervade the universe and their different frequencies give rise to all the matter and energy in creation. Theoretical physicist Michio Kaku one of the developers of string theory, describes the cosmos in his book *The Mind of God* "as a great symphony of vibrating strings." He writes that quantum physics has identified "the mind of God" and it appears as cosmic music resonating through eleven dimensions of hyperspace. I would add that the primordial substance of the multiverse is composed of symphonic, vibratory waves of sound, light and motion. So, when we sing and dance, we have the potential to connect to this most subtle, vibratory energy. As movement

connects us to the flowing, pulsating primal source of life, it increases our sense of wholeness and interconnectedness. When we fully engage all our senses and finely tune our body like a violin, we can then tune into multiple frequencies and our atoms can vibrate and resonate in harmony with the great cosmic primal symphony.

In the *Srimad-Bhagavatam*, the Rig Veda and other Hindu texts, the upper planetary systems are said to be inhabited by celestial musicians called *Gandharvas* and beautiful dancing maidens, or *Apsaras* who often are married to the *Gandharvas*. Authoritative accounts of near-death experiences described in books by Raymond Moody and others frequently describe encounters with beautiful dancing girls accompanied by heavenly music. We find that dance and music are deeply inscribed in sacred mythologies all over the world. Anthropologist Erika Bourginon found that 90% of world cultures have some sort of culturally patterned form of movement to facilitate transformation.

5. Dancing Gods and Goddesses

The philosopher Nietzsche in his famous work, the *Birth of Tragedy*, extolled the power and potency of dance that he felt was generated from the Dionysian impulse in humankind. For Nietzsche, the Greek god Dionysus, the god of ecstasy, was symbolic of the generative creative life force, the Shiva and Shakti energy in Hindu traditions, that leads to our yearning to be gods incarnate. The ancient Greeks, like the great Yogic sages, extolled the body as the temple of the spirit. Many of the early festivals were spontaneous outpourings of ecstatic, devotional song and movement. Nietzsche wrote:

In song and in dance man expresses himself as a member of a higher community; he has forgotten how to walk and speak and is on the way toward flying in the air, dancing. . . . he feels himself a god, he himself now walks about enchanted, in ecstasy, like the gods he saw walking in his dreams.

In rhythmic sacred movement, as in music and ecstatic poetry, we experience our aliveness and our yearning to incarnate the gods, goddesses, the prophets, and visionaries within us whether Nataraj, Dionysus, Apollo, or Miriam, the old testament prophet of the Israelites. Miriam led the Israelites in song and dance, declaring “*Come sing and dance to the God who has freed us!*” Through dance and song, the Israelites reaffirmed their faith and remembrance of God’s promise of freedom and deliverance.

6. The Body: A Symbol-Making Instrument

The body, like the mind, is a symbol making instrument, encoded with archetypal images and memories that reside not only in our minds but also in our musculature. Thus, the body is potent with meaning. As symbols are multivocal, referring simultaneously to many different contexts, their meaning may be determined by the nature of an individual's experience and his/her cultural context and mythological associations of that culture.

In African diaspora religions for example, the body is considered mapped by the divinities themselves. In Haitian Vodun the feet are dedicated to Ogun, the god of war and fire, the spine to the snake god Damballah and the hips to Congo's spirit of beauty and love. The spirits in the Korean shamanistic Kut ceremony enter through the head or crown chakra as do the orishas, the gods and goddesses in Afro-Cuban Santeria and Vodun.

7. Love as the Fuel and Fire of Transformation

Rhythmic movement in and of itself are only vehicles for transcendence when the psyche is elevated and aspirational. The real fuel that ignites the flame of our spiritual fire is *bhakti*, the Sanskrit word for devotional love that is grounded in moral principles. The body is a sacred site, and the love that emanates from the heart is the center point of *bhakti*'s bodily home. 15

8. Isadora Duncan: Revolutionary of the Spirit

So, I will close now with a short participatory exercise from the technique of Isadora Duncan. Before we begin, close your eyes and place your hand on your solar plexus or heart center and silently feel the rising and falling wave rhythms of the breath as I speak these words from Isadora:

Can you imagine after long study, prayer and inspiration, that you have attained such a degree of understanding that your body is simply the luminous manifestation of your soul; that your body dances in accordance with a music heard inwardly, in an expression of something out of another, a profounder world, that your body and soul have grown so harmoniously together that the natural language of your soul will have become the movement of your body?

11. Participatory Guided Movement Exercise- "The Universe" from Technique of Isadora Duncan

Now I will close with a short guided participatory exercise. Bend over drawing into yourself and let your arm hang down. Imagine honey flowing from your fingertips. Now unfolding your body start to slowly draw a line through the center of your torso, your personal axis mundi, moving through

each chakra like sap flowing upwards through your tree of life or like the kundalini energy rising from the root chakra. Stop at the center point of this axis mundi of yourself at the heart space and activate the "motor in your soul." Concentrate on your anahata chakra at the heart center; this is the seat of your divine self. Then expand outward with the breath into the space by lifting your chest up and look heavenwards and invoke the divine and aspire to BE, to manifest the highest. Make your dance gesture a prayer, a call of the innermost self-radiating outwards from the solar plexus into the vast, eternal space. As a prayer, you affirm the beauty and truth of the bodily Self. As a prayer it is a call of devotion towards your god or higher power and a homage to the divine source of life. In this way, you are sanctifying your bodily self in a creative, reflexive moment and you generate and become the gods and goddesses that you aspire to be. Now open your arms and palms and invoke the Creator and All that is. Remember that it is our birthright to be in tune with the rhythms of the universe. In the image of Shiva or Nataraj, we are all cosmic dancers enacting this drama of birth, death, and perpetual rebirth.