

Serpent Dances, Serpent Power: The Relation Between Body and Spirit in Dance

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*O friend, understand: the body
Is like the ocean, Rich with hidden treasures.

Open your innermost chamber and light its lamp.

within the body are gardens,
Rare flowers, peacocks, the inner Music;
Within the body a lake of bliss,
On it the white soul-swans take their joy.

And in the body, a vast market –
Go there, trade,
Sell yourself for a profit you can't spend.

Mirabai (Indian Mystic, 16th Century)*

The theme

With this essay I want to approach a phenomenon that I have dealt with for a long time but which seems to elude me again and again. I find it difficult to grasp with words and also know that it touches a taboo. The issue is the experience in women of the sacred or spiritual dimension in dance in relation to the corporal or bodily dimension. Both levels interpenetrate in the dance; however, not every dance is experienced as something holy. Due to our perception I can leave out the spiritual dimension of the dance when I look at it and sense it whereas the bodily dimension, which has to do with physical presence, can hardly be eliminated since movement is in the space-time-level. The perception of sacred moments in the body is dependent upon my being open for this dimension. If the opening is possible then I can sense a relation to the Unknowable, the Unlimited. If not, then I remain on my own in the physical dimension.

The approach

This theme reflects a very specific aspect of my work and my being as a woman. The serpent as a symbol of the living powers of the earth has appeared in my dreams quite often over many years with its different shapes and its sacred and erotic colourings. These were intense experiences, and very often my fear of snakes was prevalent. The serpent was easily accessible to me in the dance with its joyful and playful aspects and also its immense powers. This personal background, very important for my working with women, has led me to the question and theme of this essay, although I find myself in an uneasy and vulnerable position presenting an article like this in an academic context.

My concern about this issue surpasses my personal interests because I think it is important to document and examine the relation of spirituality and sexuality in women. It arises in my dance work with the need for women of different ages to live the spiritual dimension in the dance, to dance without limits.

My thesis is that spiritual experiences in women are reflected in a specific bodily way and that they often have an erotic quality that is distinct from erotic encounters in relationships. Dance as a physical medium enables us to sense the sacred erotic and to find an expression for it. This is even more so if the dance has a spiritual alignment. Dance connects intensive and partially conscious breathing with music and movement. It expresses the essence of all levels of being through a fleeting movement, constantly flowing, not standing still. Thus, it tangibly reflects the process of nature and opens us for the plane of being. Dance enables us to experience ourselves as whole human beings, encompassing the physical, emotional, mental and spiritual dimensions.

From my point of view, dance can be a very deep prayer, free from any creed. It is a contact with the cosmos. Expressed by writer Paulo Coelho, „Dance is one of the most perfect mediums of communicating with the infinite wisdom.“ This is probably true even for many secular forms of dance, only without consciously perceiving this dimension. Dance relates to the whole human being, the whole woman. This is more important for women because they experience and perceive their bodies differently than men.

I want to explore my thesis through the descriptions of the women who attended one of my seminars and from whom I asked to write down their perceptions. The seminar, titled „Serpentdances, Serpentpower - Accesses to the Sacred Erotic in the Dance“, took place in northern Germany in December 1997 with 12 participants aged 40 – 66. The reports are written by 7 women.

The serpent

I consciously chose the symbol of the serpent as a starting point to open up the theme of the sacred erotic in the dance because it is linked in a specific way to women in the Judeo-Christian culture. The snake has a very ambiguous stance in our culture and is associated with temptation in relation to Genesis. At the same time the serpent is seen in the Indian-Asiatic culture as a symbol for the female kundalini-energy which envelops the spine during spiritual evolution. It represents the cosmic life-energy and the energy of matter. Jolande Jacobi signifies it as the serpent of redemption, standing for transformation, healing, the continuity of birth, death and rebirth, for magic and wisdom.

Furthermore the snake is a significant bearer of meaning. It inspires us on the one hand to develop, to shed our skin, and on the other hand it evokes fear because of its strangeness, speed, size and potential to kill. As a visual symbol and in dreams it affects us in its secret ways. The serpent is an animal-symbol with a great and uncanny erotic power in terms of flexibility, playing with the tongue and the art of seduction. The snake has been related to the dance through its supple movements since ancient times. Serpent dances work toward the evolution of inner and outer power and beauty.

The efficiency of the symbol in general

The initial corporal access to the symbol of the serpent is through winding and wriggling movements (the whole body, parts of the body and the tongue). A step-by-step approach to the symbol is experienced in a bodily and spatial manner. Not only are our visual perception and imagination in the foreground, but the kinaesthetic body sense takes charge as an organ

of perception. The center of attention moves from the head to the belly: here the main point is how something is perceived in contrast to what is perceived in the upper part of the body. We can access different levels of the symbol when we include the body in the act of symbolizing.

The special space of the symbol is delimited from the normal environment of everyday reality. The perception of time is different than the „normal“ chronological sense of time and belongs to a differently structured reality. In the act of symbolizing with the medium of dance „another“ order is experienced: a new dimension. This experience is holistic by including all the levels of being - the corporal, emotional, mental and spiritual. It can be seen as a renewal of one's own energy which enriches everyday life, much like the recurring ceremonies of renewal in the course of the year used by old religions and rites and considered important elements for success in life. The bodily approach to the symbols through the dance accesses the questions of our personal existence and thus relates the personal with the transpersonal.

The concrete setting: music and the dance

The seminar took place in a seminar house near Bremen, Germany, from Friday evening 6 p.m. to Sunday afternoon 3 p.m. The house provided a protected space and framework where each woman could open to the experiences in her own way. The women did not know each other. At first there was time to get to know each other and warm up to the subject. Rounds of both group verbal feedback and reflection in pairs after a partner exercise (with one woman dancing and one watching as „witness“ and vice versa) allowed participants to become more aware and conscious about what was experienced.

In the beginning we moved winding across the floor, played with the sounds of the serpent and used the tongue as a medium of expression. This happened partly in groups of two and partly with the whole group. The structured dances included various circle dances from different cultural backgrounds as well as my own circle dances. There was also a dance of the snake alone on the floor and another one on the floor with eyes closed involving lifting oneself up and which was accompanied by a witness and guardian to protect the participant from being touched by other dancers and of being hurt. I used music from Australia for the last exercise with sounds of the didgeridoo that convey both a special connection to the earth and power by the depth of its sounds and also reflect the celebration and honouring of the earth in the culture of the aborigines. On Sunday there was a dance based on the theme of shedding the skin. Within a circle of cloth a woman danced by creeping through a canal created by four women. This ritual ended in receiving light in the form of a candle which another women had cared for during the dance.

Dance experiences from some of the women

1) E. S.

Dance with M. That means M. was „guarding“ me as it was a dance with eyes closed, without a break for 20 minutes, the first 10 minutes on the ground (earth) and the last 10 minutes free. We did not hear the music before we started: (1) Earth-dance, serpent on the earth, totally incredible music, let the ground shake, it took hold of me totally - no turning back. I was taken by it. „It“ was dancing me and I had a feeling of archaic force, oneness, surren-

der ... death ... resurrection; light and darkness, above and below, sexuality and spirituality. I always have a sense of „being free“ when I dance. It is always as if it moves something in me and as if I move something through it – but this dance was something very special and the feeling transcended the words

(2) Then the second half took me completely by surprise. I had not expected this kind of music and it is not so present for me now, but after I had surrendered to it, joy arose in me, a very great, deep joy and a wish to express this joy through the movement. It seemed as if I had no weight, a feeling of no gravity at all, of flying, which I sometimes can imagine and experience in my dreams but why only there? A very great bliss was in me, brightness, light and warmth – I flew and still I was dancing on the earth – and – very important – the feeling to be cared for without danger. This was wonderful!

Observation by C. F: Seen from the outside the dance of E. was incredibly erotic. It was like a sexual act with the earth, flexible, surrendering, ecstatic, a woman in her midsixties.

2) H. R.

Friday evening: I first had to overcome an overwhelming inhibition before I could even begin to allow myself to play with the tongue (with my own and in contact with the others). The first feeling was „this is forbidden“, and I felt nauseous; then gradually more fun with the seducing aspect.

Saturday: 1. Dancing the serpent

At first I sensed that I had to wait for the movements of the snake in me, the wish to feel them, also the wish to ascend vertically. The energy was on the ground. I could not rise up. It had not suited the serpent in me. It was more a waiting and listening – after the dance disappointment and sadness.

2. Dancing the serpent

My energy was again on the ground for a long time. I experienced the ground as sustaining, with much quietness and also an erotic sensation - not for anyone in particular, but just of itself. I also sensed some impulses from an archaic dark power which can rear up, which wants to destroy and can if it is not permitted to. Then the movement moved more and more towards rising up. The darkness subsided the more I surged upwards. It took a long time and there were long phases in-between of sitting, kneeling and half-standing. The wish and impulse to rise and extend grew stronger and stronger and more delightful, and the alignment to the above felt as if a channel was opened, very clearly aligned through me and transcending me into the universe, bright and white light, not always, but again and again. Then there was emptiness – a calm in me – and gratitude.

Sunday: 3. The shedding

Rather a fight, tiring – the wish to shed off the unessential, to be free of my patterns. It was hard. Maybe I move too quickly into the upward direction without bringing the „fight“ completely to an end; in the meantime it was beautiful to feel my power, tenacity and flexibility. Before I crawled through the tunnel I had fear – what happens if I get stuck? But also a power without compromise to come through absolutely! As I perceived that I would make it I could draw back a bit and sense how it was there: warm, sheltered, narrowed, all at the same time. It was good to feel the resistance of the other bodies. Afterwards I laid on

my back and felt unsheltered and yet completely safe, said the mantra and prayed. Beautiful then to receive the light.

3.) C. M.

Yes, during this weekend most important for me was to sense the divine lust. It is simply there and not dependent on an encounter with another human being.

4.) C. D.

On Saturday I felt guarded and taken care of as I had a „guardian“ full of love. I could therefore be very open in the dance and surrender to the movements and feelings. During the dance I was full of longing (also physically). It was good, but at the same time hurt. When I danced on my back I was conscious of my vulnerability. I could accept myself as I was, including all of my feelings. I did not judge myself and did not feel judged and therefore felt very sheltered. This was a good experience.

5.) E. W.

In the morning we danced the dance of the serpent playing with the tongue, turning you on and displaying its eroticism on the one hand and the dangerous and death-bringing hissing serpent on the other hand. I liked it. The meeting with every woman was different, but it mainly had to do with lust and play, not with danger. In course of time a deep vibration started in my belly, a power that came out of the earth, took me in, evoked fear in me, made me alive and crushed me. It was a burden on me or better: it pulled me strongly to the earth. Unpleasantly heavy - how I would avoid it in everyday life - a lot of power that is not able to be controlled by the head.

So I held back in the following serpent-dance with pairs and let C. begin. Tears already ran down my cheeks when I was in the position of the witness - I was moved, filled with inner turmoil.

In the afternoon it was my turn and I felt good about myself before the dance. Then the music started with its deep vibrations that seemed to come directly from inside the earth and wrapped me up and took me inside. A wave of lust and sexual excitement came over me - it was unpleasant for me and embarrassing and I thought: „How stupid, just now. Must that happen here?“ But the thoughts were unessential and faded into the background.

A sensation spread out in me: my whole lower body including the legs turned into a huge excited vagina, moist and glittering dark red which wriggled with me over the dancing ground. I enjoyed this lascivious feeling, pure excitement without and no thought of satisfaction through whomever. Then my upper body started to transform and formed into a large penis, a huge phallus, the glans of which was my head which I pulled lustfully through the earth; yes, I ploughed the earth with a lot of feeling and lust with the touch. Then I surged upwards, longing for union with my vagina, and suddenly a closed circle arose in me. The phallus merged with the vagina and I felt light and in great harmony, joyful, a feeling of wholeness let me dance softly and satisfied. The first thought: why is the serpent female? The answer: It is not! It is, as we all are, also male. The thought of embarrassment and shame comes up again and again when I talk about the experience, but the experience was so great

and beautiful and so distant to thinking that the process was not disturbed. Now still – one week later – I sense the liveliness of both of these parts in me. I try to conceptualise them to put them into an order and I come to the conclusion that this world of sensations can only vaguely be described. Upon reflection I can only bow down before it to honour and cherish the experience.

6) B. F.

(written down by C. F.)

The rising up of the serpent was tremendously special. It was the lust of the phallus/erection on which she enjoyed so delightfully. She had never thought that she would be able to sense this kind of male feeling.

7) A. S.

I am lying on the ground, my head on the ground. The music begins and I feel the need to roll my head over the ground and stay curled up. Then I spread out on my belly and glide along wriggling, holding my ear to the ground with enthusiasm and hearing the tunes of the vibrations. I experience the ground as masculine, offering resistance to my body, which feels soft, feminine, erotic and erotically connected to the ground. I perceive the waves of the winding as alive and flexible.

The Conclusion

The descriptions by the dancers clearly show the interpenetration of the physical and spiritual dimensions. One's own body or a part of the environment is experienced in the dance as an erotic vis-à-vis. This experience is divided into the polarities of female and male as the dance moves towards a union. A tremendous amount of energy is then set free which, depending upon the unique experience of each woman, has a colouring of its own: harmony, beauty, freedom, lust, light, stillness, greatness and being alive, longing and union.

In the circle of the women and with this explicit theme it was possible to share and speak about the physical and erotic-spiritual quality of experience of the dances. The different shades of the POWER which runs through us, fills us and which we give to life could be perceived and expressed. This power is experienced physically by women, so it is of utmost importance not to divide the body from spirituality as was practiced in Christian circles during the last 2000 years. The living relation of both dimensions of being human in the female body has a great power of healing and transformation, as we experience the source directly in ourselves. This also means making matter holy again, no longer „cut off from the spiritual“.

The tradition of the sacred prostitute can now be seen on a new level. To be at the command of the divine as a woman in and with the body is a tradition that existed long ago in human history. Even though we cannot turn back evolution or return to old forms, the conscious perception and sensation of the body as a holy space can serve as an inspiration to discover new ways of healing and relating to the earth. Dance is the appropriate medium for this.