

Ecstatic Dance

By Karen Berggren

"Everyone is dying to live ecstatically in a community where spirits and people are equal."

- Arnold Mindell, *The Shaman's Body*

Across time and culture, dance has long been revered for its power to heal body, mind, and soul, strengthen the bonds of community, and to commune with spirit and nature allowing us to discover deeper aspects of who we are as human beings. Dance is also used as a form of worship, celebration, storytelling and myth-making, and to commemorate important rites of passage.

Cut off from its healing and esoteric roots, western culture has relegated dance to a form of entertainment, a way to socialize, or to attract a mate. It is generally not considered a way to pray, meditate, evoke visionary experience, or commune with spirit and nature. Yet in the past decade or so, it seems that ancient understandings of the wider importance of dance are impressing themselves upon the modern mind, as if welling up from old, vibrant memories of the tribal soul within. Dance as a symbolic language of the psyche that can initiate healing, visionary, and ecstatic experience is being explored by increasing numbers of people searching for new levels of health, wholeness, and spiritual partnership.

The roots of ecstasy

When we think of someone in ecstasy we usually picture a person swooning with wild abandon, joy and happiness. Yet ecstasy is also much more than this. It is an experience of unity and wholeness with an order of being much larger than the reality you're normally familiar with. It may arrive during the throes of a painful or deep heart-rending event such as the death of a loved one, or a debilitating illness. It is the last thing you might ever expect to show up in the center of a deeply challenging experience, but sometimes it does.

Terrence McKenna defines ecstasy as a complex emotion containing elements of joy, fear, terror, triumph, surrender and empathy. It derives from the Greek word ekstasis, meaning "displacement, trance, to take flight, to drive out of one's senses." The *Women's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets* defines it as "standing forth naked." Einstein referred to it as the "ultimate religious feeling state," while author Chris Griscom views it as "the higher self in action."

A defining trait of ecstasy is its immediacy. Ecstasy is not some splendid event, like a ravishing sunset, that happens in the external world before our eyes and ears. Ecstasy happens to our selves. It is a momentary transformation of the knower, not merely a transformation of the knower's experience.

- Jourdain, *Ecstasy and The Brain*

Ecstasy bestows a sense of amazing grace and can come about with, or without, conscious intention. It is a deeply intimate experience, an opening and merging of the heart and mind that leads one into a highly palpable sense of the whole being greater than the sum of the parts. No social, political, personal, or dogmatic constructs of any kind can repress or erase it from human experience.

Ecstatic experience is the oldest form of healing and spiritual practice known with evidence of it dating back over 30,000 years to ancient traditions of shamanism. It is believed that shamans were the first to discover and codify the use and power of ecstasy through rhythmical expressions such as drumming, dancing, and chanting to carry them on their journeys into a world beyond the

ordinary. We can glean some of the significance dance held in ancient tribal life, for next to hunting, it is the second most common activity shown in cave paintings.

The "flight of ecstasy" is an anthropological term given to the shaman's journey into these non-ordinary realms. In *The World is as You Dream It*, John Perkins introduces us to "dream change", a translated term Ecuadorian shamans use to describe this flight of ecstasy and its purpose. The basic tenet of shamanism holds that our physical universe is an emanation, a protrusion, a dream, from this non-ordinary reality that is believed to be the source of all creation. Some names for this primary reality are the sacred realm, the mythic world, the Dreamtime, or in humanistic terms, the psyche. The physicist, David Bohm, refers to it as "the implicate order". The shaman journeys into this other realm to effect change in physical reality for the benefit of an individual or the tribe. During the flight of ecstasy, the shaman's goal is to find and intentionally engage or reconcile an issue at its source in the sacred realm, understanding that the results of this encounter will eventually manifest in physical reality - in effect, "changing the dream". Ecstatic dance! Meditation in motion.

Ecstatic dance, which is sometimes referred to as trance dance, is based on the tenets of shamanism and has been used for eons as a method for dream change. It is a multi-layered experience that takes the dancer on an inner journey to the sacred realm to connect him to other sources of guidance, activate abilities to re-invent himself, or invite spirit or life force energy to embody and heal him. Actually, the term "embody" is a bit misleading, because this life force energy is within each of us, already. The demands, addictions, and over-rational beliefs of the modern world have served to impede its flow and fragment this awareness away from us, taking with it other vital aspects of the self. Ecstatic dance helps restore this vital flow of life force energy and recover lost parts of the soul in the process. It is a way to re-member and vitalize the inherent shamanic archetype each of us carries within our body-mind complex. The part of our psyche that reveals our interconnections within the greater web of life and seeks to identify and change the dreams that no longer serve our well-being, personally and collectively.

Ecstatic dance is a form of active meditation where music, movement, and the breath are used to shift brain wave patterns from the day-to-day cognitive beta state, to the more meditative and insightful alpha state. The terms trance and altered state of consciousness refer to brain waves resonating at the alpha state, as well as theta and delta. Michael Harner has coined the term shamanic state of consciousness (SSC) to describe this level of awareness. The SSC is what the ecstatic dancer seeks, as well as the shaman, to initiate the dream change process.

Entering the Shamanic State of Consciousness landscape

Before entering an ecstatic dance journey, the dancer forms an intention for a particular dream change. Then, surrendering herself into the music, she allows her body to merge and intuitively move with the rhythms. This process shifts her brain wave patterns bringing on the SSC. As this occurs, the line is often blurred between the dancer's sense of her physical body and the rhythms themselves. Once the SSC is established, the veils that appear to separate the self into mind, body, and soul in ordinary reality are pulled away so that the dancer can experience herself and her intention at another level of being and interaction. The entire SSC landscape becomes alive and sentient, where the dancer often experiences an expanded sense of her self, not merely in communication, but partnered with a greater source of being.

While the dancer allows her movements to intuitively express the energy of her intended dream change, the mind remains in a relaxed, yet attentive state, observing the process more than directing it. Hidden doors open in the psyche and information in the form of images, sensations, or insights related to the dancer's intention arise into conscious awareness. The dance then becomes a dialogue of sorts between the worlds; the body listening and responding to deeper cues and information, while the mind makes note of journey imagery and interjects a telepathic question or comment now and then. The aptitudes of both left and right brain hemispheres are brought into play, synergistically. The dance becomes not only a place to express one's intention

through movement, but also to listen for feedback and guidance on that intention from other sources of knowing.

It is not unusual for ecstatic dance to open up into what people describe as a visionary experience of a mystical or spiritual nature. In these experiences, dancers report such things as communicating with spirit guides, animals, nature spirits, the earth, geometric shapes or symbols, or being immersed in a divine healing light or energy. Information gained in these experiences is frequently described as an instantaneous transmission or downloading of a large chunk of knowledge. Although it may take several pages in a journal to relay the information afterwards, it was all seen, learned, or realized within mere seconds. It also happens that specific information about the dance journey is not immediately available to you, but may take weeks or even months to rise into conscious awareness. It may take even longer to fully integrate this information into your life, so patience, reflection, diligence, and self-compassion are key.

Ecstatic dance sees the body as a holy vessel of the spirit, a sacred kiva where we can awaken and mobilize our greatest talents, healing, and dream change abilities, oftentimes repressed or hidden from our sight for years. The dance then becomes a source of revelation and renewal. It re-connects us to the great web of life. From this experience our whole being: body, mind, and soul, and all our relations are honored as sacred and the work of beauty it is. There is a profound sense of sovereignty and sanctity that comes when the body has a time and place to genuinely express this deeper reality of the self, without having our socialized sensibilities reprimand or censor its expression. This in itself can be incredibly healing and liberating.

Why dream change through ecstatic dance works

When brain waves shift from ordinary consciousness into an SSC, we enter the realm of experience where the mind doesn't distinguish between what is real and what is not. In effect, everything is real in an SSC. The dance journey experienced through this awareness guides us to our inner "field of possibilities" where we find the most fertile soil to plant and tend the seeds of our dream change intentions.

One working theory is that ecstatic dance enhances the dream change process by amplifying the creative powers of belief through movement. Rather than entering the landscape of the SSC through your mind alone, as in still meditation, in ecstatic dance your body is resonating with, moving through, and expressing the reality and interactions of the journey environment. Every cell in your body is humming with the dream change reality. Your body, mind, and heart are collaboratively engaged, experiencing the journey's context and contents as real.

In ordinary reality, we also know that a moving body initiates change. So when we put the body in motion to express the dream change journey, our movements inherently reinforce the belief that the change we seek is already in motion, that it is happening. In effect, you are able to experience your dream-changed self and its reality before it occurs in ordinary reality. Ecstatic dance also connects us with the larger rhythms of life and the potent numinous forces that are constantly flowing through us like a deep river. Dance gives concrete form and expression to these forces, so that we may reflect upon their substance and dynamics. In doing so we begin working with them more consciously and creatively, rather than being possessed by them, unknowingly, at our peril.

"To dance then, is to pray, to meditate, to enter into communion with the larger dance, which is the universe."

- Jean Houston

If I want to try ecstatic dance, what do I do? There are different forms of contemporary ecstatic dance. I recommend exploring different models, for each has something important to contribute to our understanding of dance as a healing modality and method for dream change. Gabrielle

Roth, the long-time pioneer of ecstatic dance in the west, offers a model based on a five-rhythm process she calls "The Wave." Frank Natale has created another simply called Trance Dance in which a bandana covers the eyes and oxygenated breath is used to embark on a journey. There is another form called PanEuRhythmy that is done outdoors with specific movements and inspirational readings. There are many other forms as well; each with the ability to connect you to other ways of knowing.

The approach I use unfolded organically over the years, primarily through communication with the sentient landscape of the ecstatic dance journey. It focuses on a synthesis of four archetypal elements: intention, surrender, entrainment and imagery used within a context of music, movement, and non-ordinary states of awareness. The elements combine to evoke the deeper stories, imagery, characters and creative energies in the overarching landscape of the psyche and provide a means to interact with them. Due to their archetypal nature, these four elements can be easily integrated with other forms of ecstatic dance. While it would take several pages to describe the elements in detail and how the four work together, I can offer an overview of the journey process if you wish to explore it further.

If you feel at all dance-challenged or have some sense of performance anxiety, just know that there are no wrong steps in ecstatic dance! Every move you make is right. You don't have to be concerned about being aesthetic, graceful, disciplined, pretty, strong, confident, coordinated or contained as we're so often taught that dance is about. In many ways, ecstatic dance is the antithesis of everything we've been taught that dance is supposed to be. During the dance journey, your whole being becomes the paintbrush that your spirit guides across the canvas of your soul. Your mind makes note of the images it reveals and sensations it engenders. To become the paintbrush all you need do is relax, surrender into the rhythms, and let your body wisdom guide your movements. In other words, trust and loosen your grip on the steering wheel so your greater self can drive for a while.

When you are formulating your intention, it's generally better to focus more on the feelings and qualities of it, rather than specific details of what you think the result of that intention should look like. Focusing on the qualities of the dream change also helps in being more open to the Great Mystery and its workings and perhaps less prejudiced against receiving those unexpected, quirky, yet brilliant opportunities it sends your way in response to your intentions. For example, if you are seeking a new job, picture yourself having that job and the good feelings it gives you. You are ecstatic about the work, your colleagues, the location, etc. In this way the physical details of your intention play a supporting role, rather than a starring role, in the process.

As you begin stretching, breathe deeply following your breath inward. Drink the rhythms into your body using the breath. Scan your body with your inner senses using a relaxed attention. Notice if there are areas of physical tightness or discomfort. Breathe into these places and send the rhythms there to gently bathe the area. When you exhale, envision the tension being released through your breath. Do the same with your emotional body. Scan it gently to see what's there. You don't have to be peaceful to dance. In fact, the emotions are often the juice of the experience -- the very thing that propels the journey or begs for release through the dance. Honoring your feelings and letting them express themselves through the dance is a sure route to ecstasy and well-being. As Gabrielle Roth reminds us, "put the psyche in motion and it will heal itself." So at this point, just gently scan your emotional body to see what's there. Whatever you find: stress, sadness, joy, excitement, fear, or frustration, just breathe with these feelings inviting them to share their energy and wisdom with you as part of your journey.

After a while you may put your intention aside. It has already begun to seed your dance. Give your body permission to move authentically, in any way it wishes, so that it may express the deeper reality of the self. Your inner critic may pop up with its judgments and admonitions, but just smile back and dance past. You are dancing for your self and no one else. If you don't feel like getting up off the floor, stay there and do your dance. Follow the juice. Trust. Surrender into the rhythms. Let your dance become a prayer, offering up your intention to the universe. Let it

become a cauldron burning away whatever you no longer need. Lose yourself in the motion. Be as a child. If animal spirits come, let them dance and shapeshift through you. Go with wonder and curiosity to the place your body and soul want to take you. This is not somber work; it is sacred play, mana for the soul.

As you relax and continue surrendering into the rhythms your brain waves will begin shifting from ordinary beta waves to alpha marking your entry into the SSC. Don't worry about if or when this happens. Just keep dancing. Lose yourself in the music. Give your left brain the job of free-associating with the music and your movements, as this will often initiate visionary experience. Note any images, sensations, or insights you receive along the way. If you entered the journey with a particular question in mind the information will come to you, or whatever pieces are appropriate at this time in your life. It may remain at an unconscious, imperceptible level, though you can often catch brief glimpses of this information during the journey. Then again, it can easily be days or weeks later, often when you least expect it, that insights and information from your journey suddenly flood your mind.

It is not at all unusual to feel waves of intense energy during an ecstatic dance, but have no inner visual images or cognitive cues as to how these energetic sensations relate to your dream change journey. Since physical reality is, in part, created through many levels of the psyche, (conscious, supraconscious, subconscious, and unconscious) consider that the energy you feel indicates dream change activity happening below your threshold of cognitive awareness. Trust that whatever contents you need to know will eventually bubble up into your awareness. If you are journeying with a guide, you can also turn to them during the dance or afterwards and see what clarification they may offer.

When I first experienced intense energy in the dance, my body adopted a stomping movement for a few moments. As I followed this movement with my mind I became aware that it was my body's way of acknowledging the energy and grounding the knowledge it carried into my being. As I joined my thoughts with this movement, I thanked the energy for coming to assist me and affirmed that I would have conscious access to the content when I was ready, or needed it. If you encounter a similar experience, let your body create whatever dance movement feels right to acknowledge the energy and to affirm its knowledge into your being for future reference.

While we are on the topic of intense energy, it is not unusual for ecstatic dance to activate kundalini in the sacrum. This is life force energy that curls up the spine and emanates outward through every pore in your body. It creates a buzzing, tingling, heady, or at times an orgasmic sensation. Sit or lie down if it gets too intense. The journey will often continue, undisturbed. If you are new to ecstatic dance, be gentle with yourself. Take your time to become familiar with entering SSCs in this manner and traversing the landscape. It is different for each person, and no two journeys are alike. The more you strive to have a certain type or intensity of ecstatic experience, the more the tendency is for it to slip away, entirely. You really have to open and surrender to a deeper directive. As Rilke once advised a young poet "be patient towards all that is unsolved in your heart and try and love the questions themselves, like books that are written in a very foreign tongue". The point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Rilke's eloquent advice applies here beautifully as well. Live and love your questions. Dance them fully, to the best of your ability and one day, perhaps without even noticing it, you will dance yourself into their answers.

At the end of the dance, being still is also an important and powerful part of the journey. Sometimes inner imagery becomes most active during this time. Direct your breath and the rhythms to any place you feel needs or wants attention. Afterwards, take a few minutes to record your impressions of the experience, whether pictorially or with words. Information gained during ecstatic dance journeys can also be beneficial in augmenting more traditional forms of therapy.

Ecstatic dance for the physically-restricted

If your physical movements are restricted in any way, you can still experience the benefits of ecstatic dance. Find a comfortable chair, or if you can be propped up in bed, do so and follow the above guidance, only envision yourself dancing your dream change in your mind's eye. When you drink the music into your body, give your mind all the freedom you can to free associate with the rhythms and the beat in your body. If it is comfortable, rock or sway slightly, or tap a finger or toe to the music. Even the slightest movement combined with music and your intention can have profound effects.

For in reality, rhythm and our ability to imagine are some of the greatest teachers and healers. Rhythm is the basis of our entire existence from the micro- to the macro-cosmic. It moves through us all the time, on all levels: physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual seeking harmony and greater order in all its interactions. It is the language of creation, the mother tongue of us all. Rhythm stimulates the imagination and evokes the shamanic state of consciousness whether you drum, dance, sing, chant, walk, or breathe your way there. Ecstatic dance is just one way to gather and synthesize the healing and dream change power of rhythm and the imagination.

The great ambassador of the drum, Babatunde Olatunji cautions that when we fall out of rhythm with our selves, our community, the earth, or with spirit, disease is sure to follow. I have come to recognize the profound truth in these words. So whether or not you are healthy or have full mobility, it is not only wise but extremely fun to include a conscious dose of rhythm along with your daily vitamins!