Inaugural Issue

GLOBAL INDIAN ARTIST

September 2025

GIA

Diaspora & Dance

Indian Dance in New York's Cultural Landscape: A Memoir Across Cultures. Uttara Asha Coorlawala reflects on how Indian dance continues to evolve within New York's dynamic cultural landscape.

Wellbeing & Ecology

Synergies: The Intersection of Yoga and Nātyam. Nrithya Jagannathan explores the inward journey of Yoga and Natya, highlighting discipline, meditation, and awareness as pathways toward sahrdayatva and ultimately kaivalyam.

Cultural Stewardship

Milap: Building Bridges and Shaping Communities. Alok Nayak introduces MilapSpace, a global platform making continuous, high-quality learning in Indian arts accessible to all.

Embodiment as Wellbeing

Dr. Shriya Srinivasan & Dr. Joshua George

At The Crossroads Of Science, Medicine, And Bharatanatyam

Photo Credit: ***Malique Pye***

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EDITORIAL

Curator's Note

As I write this editorial, memories surface — of the many emotions I have lived through in a checkered journey as professional dancer, educator, mentor, critic, author, and now, editorial curator of this magazine. Alongside these roles, what pops up in bold letters in my imagined memoir are the harried rhythms of multitasking — the "im-balancing" roles of daughter, wife, daughter-in-law, mother, and grandmother while pursuing a professional career. Even with the unwavering support of family and friends, the juggle is real, its toll most deeply felt in the quality of sleep and energy. It was only natural, then, that our launch issue turned its gaze toward Embodiment as Wellbeing. I hope the articles offered here find resonance with you, and perhaps open a moment of pause in your own journey.

Embodiment as wellbeing is not a new idea. It is as old as the Vedas and the Nāṭyaśāstra, which see the body as the vessel of rasa; as timeless as the Yoga Sūtras, which remind us that practice is as much about steadiness as it is about freedom. Yet the urgency of this idea feels different today as we artists live at the crossroads of speed and stillness. To speak of wellbeing now is to speak not only of health, but of balance — of sustainable living shaped by steady practice and conscious choices.

We are listening.
Global Indian Artist™
is a space for dialogue.
Share your thoughts,
reflections, and stories with us
— we'd love to hear from you.

editor@globalindianartist.com

This inaugural issue reflects that truth in many forms. As we begin this journey, I express my gratitude to Dr. Anita Ratnam, whose platform Narthaki published my first dance critique in 2014, and to Sukanya Sankar, Trustee of the Sruti Foundation, for their unwavering support. I hope to carry forward what they have given me. A big shout-out as well to our collaborators for their trust, friendship, and generosity.

We are honored to serve as media partner for the Intersections: Indian Dance Conference, hosted by the Mittal Institute at Harvard and MITHAS, and to shine a spotlight on Milapspace UK, extending the conversation beyond the stage, into these pages, and into your lives.

I hope this magazine becomes a space to share your experiences and find resonance with others. Consider it a gathering place of our stories and voices, of our struggles and hopes, and a living archive of how we nurture and imagine wellbeing together.

As you turn these pages, I invite you to pause, reflect, and recognize the ways embodiment shapes your own wellbeing — whether in a dancer's line, a teacher's presence, a mentor's wisdom, a plate of nourishing food, or the quiet rhythm of your breath.

Welcome to the first issue.

— **Anita Vallabh, Ph.D.**
Founder & Editorial Curator, Global Indian Artist LLC

Arts & Features

Cover Story - At the crossroads of Science, Medicine, and Bharatanatyam

*By **Anita Vallabh, Ph.D.***
*Featuring **Dr. Shriya Srinivasan & Dr. Joshua George***

Lecture Demonstration of "Decoded Rhythms: The Haptic Experience of Dance" at the Harvard ArtLab recording for PBS NOVA's Building Stuff Series (2023).
Photo credit: ***Deepika Gopalakrishnan.***

The idea of an independent publishing platform - which would later become Global Indian Artist ™ - first took root in my conversations with Dr. Shriya Srinivasan and Dr. Joshua George. When they invited me to review the inaugural Intersections: Indian Dance Conference, it quickly became clear that what they were building needed a space larger than a single article. To step up to their needs, and to the needs of a field in search of dialogue and depth, GIA was born.

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It felt only natural, then, that Shriya and Joshua - whose vision, rigor, and collaborative spirit I had witnessed up close - should be on the cover of our first launch issue. Their story reflects the very mission of GIA: to celebrate diaspora, dance, and dialogue as living, evolving traditions.

Anita Vallabh: Let's start at the beginning - what first sparked your interest in dance?

Shriya: I grew up immersed in an atmosphere steeped in dance and music. My mother and Guru, Sujatha Srinivasan, was always teaching or practicing, and the music of great maestros like KV Narayanaswamy and MS Subbulakshmi echoed through our home. The subtleties of a thodi or the sense of an arudhi became part of my being before I even realized it. Watching senior students create striking geometries with their feet and my mother weave stories with her abhinaya captured my interest and desire to step into the world of Bharatanatyam. Of course, interest was one part of the journey. My parents - especially my father, committed countless hours driving me to classes, prepping programs, and ensured I was prepared and practicing - nurturing my growth not only in dance but in music and the allied arts to become a holistic artist.

Shriya in performance.
Photo Credit: ***Ranganathan Srinivasan.***

Joshua: I grew up the youngest of three, in a house where both academics and the arts were equally valued. My father loved music and my mother, dance. While neither of them had any formal training, they were both determined to make sure we had the opportunity to learn what they did not in India. From as long as I can remember, the schedule was filled with rehearsals and lessons: church choir, violin, piano, vocal, flute lessons, and of course, dance. With three kids and two working parents, I was simply put into all the same classes as my sisters - it was practical. In that sense, I didn't exactly choose dance - but because it was always there, it quickly became a natural part of my life.

My first performance was at a church festival. At four, I was the youngest in the group and in the middle of the piece I tripped and fell. For a moment, everyone thought I'd cry or stop, but instead I got back up, found my place, and pretended nothing happened. My mom still recalls that as the first sign that a performer lived in me.

Joshua at the age of 9 (2005).
Photo Credit: ***George Cherian***

Joshua with his Guru, ***Smt. Poonam Mahesh,*** after his arangetram (2015).
Photo Credit: ***Sibu Kutty.***

Shriya performing with her mother and ***Guru Sujatha Srinivasan*** and Brahma Gana Sabha's Parampara Festival (2016).
Photo Credit: ***Sibu Kutty.***

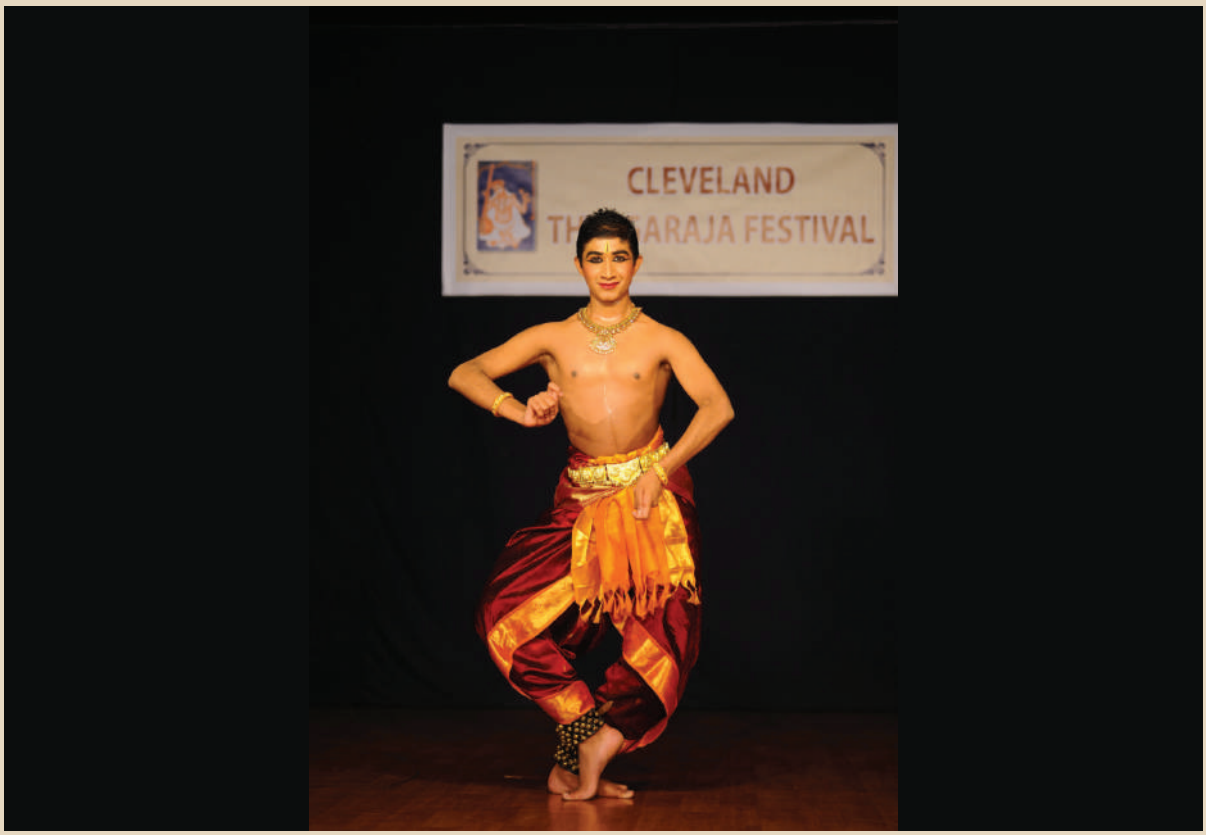
In those early years, dance gave me the joy of movement, but it wasn't until sixth grade, when I began training with my Guru, Poonam Mahesh, that I discovered its depth. I was her first student in Chicago, and also the first male student she had trained - leading to a unique opportunity for me to experience her entire creative process up close. Much of the repertoire I learned was created specifically for me: she would pick pieces and ideas that made sense for me as an individual, research and formulate the context and music, and then choreograph directly on me in class. Seeing her ideas manifest from scratch and being exposed to the level of intention with which she taught left the deep impression that Bharatanatyam is about far more than executing steps: it is about storytelling, connection, and nuance. That was when dance stopped being just an activity and became a lifelong passion.

Anita Vallabh: Who were your inspirations growing up, and how did they shape your relationship with dance?

Shriya: My mother and my music Gurus, Smt. Gnanam Subramaniam and Sri Madurai Sundar, set the expectations for what it meant to live an artistic life. Their teaching was rooted in discipline and rigor, but what struck me most was how that same discipline carried into the way they lived and dealt with the world. They showed me that one could be passionate and deeply immersed, while also accepting life's turns with grace and equanimity. Their approach shaped the seriousness with which I approached the arts. I came to see dance to be placed with intention, with the right speed, the right attack, the right softness, and always the right bhava. That expectation of precision and authenticity, of quiet intensity, became the foundation of my practice, both in the arts, but also science and life in general.

Joshua: My Guru remains my greatest inspiration. Her unparalleled creativity and insight continue to shape how I think about dance. My sisters also played a huge role. I often think back to practicing piano with both on each side of the bench - one holding the music, the other correcting my playing. And this was the way it was for every activity I learned. My oldest sister, nine years ahead of me, was like a second mother-ensuring we practiced with rigor, sitting in on classes, absorbing feedback, and making sure we applied it at home. More than that, she set the standard for what discipline and dedication looked like. From the way she approached learning to becoming a doctor, she established a path the rest of us were inspired to follow.

I also grew up surrounded by diverse influences: the serenity of church music mixed with the emotions of carnatic music; the sway of jazz and world music my father loved; and the Malayalam films we watched together as a family. All of these shaped the aesthetics that now drive my work.



Joshua performing in Chennai under the auspicesof the Cleveland Thygaraja Festival after winning the Junior category dance competition (2012).
Shot by: ***Chella Videos***

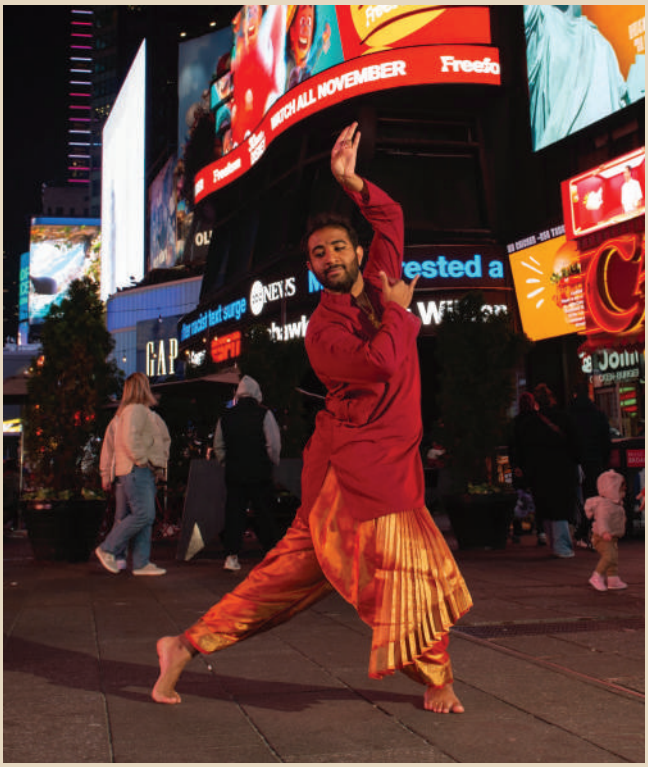
Shriya backstage at Narada Gana Sabha with her parents (2023)
Photo Credit: ***Sunitha Raghavan.***

Joshua along with his parents and sisters (1996).
From ***Archive.***

with the universal, the personal with the **Anita Vallabh:** Joshua, as a male Christian dancer practicing an art form historically framed within Hindu traditions - and at a time when male dancers were few - what challenges, if any, did you face in finding your space?

Joshua: I was fortunate to learn in an ecosystem shaped by my Guru's sensitivity and care. She never made me feel like an 'outsider,' and guided me with depth - pointing me to references, explaining nuances, and focusing on everything from musicality to philosophy. She also emphasized that Bharatanatyam's spiritual essence is universal. The gods in the repertoire are vehicles for expressing truths beyond religion- truths about values, humanity, and morality. That perspective allowed me to connect deeply with the pieces. She even created works that reflected my own background - whether Christian themes, nature, or philosophy - while honoring tradition.

I must say this journey has not been planned by any means. Growing up, I didn't see many from my community in Indian classical arts, and my parents had no frame of reference - yet they gave me everything: countless rides to classes, trips to see performances, and support across the country. I had only learned classical dance informally until my Guru serendipitously saw me at a performance and asked to teach one piece she wanted to pass on. That single item turned into years of formative training with her, opening a path I hadn't planned, and giving me wide opportunities to engage with the richness of the art. In college, I met Shriya at a campus fair, and on that very first day we choreographed together. That spark has become ten years of collaboration. With us both balancing demanding careers in science and medicine, our partnership has allowed us to dream bigger and push boundaries beyond what either of us might have done alone.



A Times Square shoot for the Anubhava Dance Company after a NYC showing of "Explorations" (2024). Photo Credit: ***Scot J. Wittman.***

Of course, I've faced questions about my background in this art. But my journey has shown me that Bharatanatyam, like any art, is ultimately larger than any one person - it finds you. Today, I see dance as self-expression. I strive to be honest about what stories make sense for me to tell, which is why I rarely present full "traditional" margams. Instead, my work often weaves mixed themes and philosophies to reflect who I am. My hope is always that audiences connect with something greater through it.

Shriya in performance for the ***Spirit of Margazhi*** and ***House of Kala Ode to Harmony*** Show in Seattle, WA (2023). Photo Credit: ***Carbon Three Studios.***

Anita Vallabh: Did you ever question holding space for both science or medicine and dance in your life?

Shriya: People often asked me what I would choose, but I never saw science and dance as competing engagements. Of course, graduate school at MIT, postdoctoral training at Harvard, and my current faculty role have demanded a deep devotion to science, to the lab, and to my students. On the other hand, in addition to practice, devotion and mental attention, dance requires a surrender of the mind and a body that is kept in good form through conditioning. Balancing both has meant ruthless time management and discipline, but pursuing both has been profoundly fulfilling. Science satisfies my analytical mind while dance nourishes my creativity and kinesthetic awareness.

Joshua: Not at all. For me, it really comes down to reflecting on where my time holds the greatest value. Yes, the daily task list can be long, but when you're working toward meaningful projects in both spheres, you know exactly why the effort matters. It doesn't feel like an overwhelming burden to balance - it becomes purposeful.

Anita Vallabh: How has dance enriched your lives beyond the stage?

Shriya: Firstly, my mother's grueling classes, long rehearsals, and constant critique instilled in me a unique flavor of stamina and resilience. In many arts, growth comes quickly at first, but then progress stalls-the dreaded plateau. Pushing through requires trust in the process, detachment from outcomes, and the ability to see failure as part of progress. This mindset has shaped my approach to science and engineering, where most experiments fail and uncertainty is constant. In research, resilience and commitment to the journey make the difference between reaching true novelty and impact versus prematurely settling for lesser outcomes.

Secondly, performance demands calm under pressure, trust in one's collaborators, and total investment in the present. This discipline of presence has been one of my greatest teachers

Dance has critically deepened my awareness of the body's interoceptive system– the inner senses that track limb position, movement, and force. Mastering complex choreography demanded fine coordination of motor and sensory systems, which sparked broader questions about how the body processes sensation and controls movement. That curiosity intersected with my research projects. For instance,

people with amputation lose the muscle connections that enable proprioception, making phantom limb movements and prosthesis use difficult. My graduate work focused on restoring these sensations through surgical techniques to reconnect and rewire neuromusculature. Throughout the work, my intuition from dance informed how I thought about the body's sensory system and worked with patients to retrain movement.

Finally, dance has given me the privilege of creating a special bond with my mother, and the fun of creating alongside Joshua - building memories, traveling, and laughing together.

Joshua: I completely agree with Shriya - once you've trained in Bharatanatyam, it never leaves you. It shapes how you see, listen, and move through the world. Years of embodying characters taught me empathy, which directly informs my work in medicine. As I walk this journey in medicine, I see that connection every single day. In patient care, it's not enough to just list the facts of a diagnosis or treatment plan. One of the first things we're taught about medical interviews is to understand not just what's happening physically, but also what's happening in the patient's world -what motivates them, what barriers they face, what support systems they have. It's a very human process. I think my years of learning to listen to characters in dance, to inhabit their lives with empathy, has made me more attentive, compassionate, and creative in how I connect with patients.

The Anubhava Team during their dancer's retreat in *Bloomington, Illinois* (2025).
From Left to Right: ***Sita Vakkalanka, Shriya Srinivasan, Joshua George, Shriya Srinivas, Swathi Jaisankar.***
Photo Credit: ***Sasi Royyuru.***

Anita Vallabh: When did you start Anubhava, and what was your first production?

Shriya & Joshua: We started Anubhava in 2015, when the two of us first met in college. At that time, we were both deeply passionate about the arts but unsure how to carve out a professional path in the U.S. We began creating pieces together just for fun– an experiment in collaboration that soon grew into something more.

Our very first production, Anubhava: The Experience, premiered at the Cleveland Thyagaraja Aradhana and brought together six dancers and six musicians– our friends. It was a margam with Sri Krishna Kamalanatho as the centerpiece, the first large-scale work we had ever choreographed together. At the time, we were so focused on the details, polishing the choreography, rehearsing with the dancers and musicians, finding costumes– that we didn't fully realize the larger picture taking shape around us.

The Anubhava Team during their first tour of ***"Anubhava: The Experience"*** in Houston, Texas (2015).
Photo Credit: ***Anil Adoni.***

The experience of homegrown Indian classical dancers coming together and producing work resonated deeply with many, and the overwhelming audience response transformed what we thought would be a one-off performance into a 10-city tour in our very first year. That moment marked not only the beginning of our dance company but also the spark of a larger vision for what lay ahead.

Reflecting on this journey today, Anubhava has grown far beyond what we ever could have imagined when we first began. At the start, it was simply a dream, a way to create a space for dancers like us, who had graduated from high school and were deeply committed to the art, yet had few meaningful outlets once we left our home ecosystems for college. What started as a response to this gap has since blossomed: we've created more than a dozen original works and toured across the country, building a platform that sustains our practice and others in similar positions. We have been fortunate to work with highly talented, motivated, and acclaimed dancers over the years, each bringing their own perspectives and energy.

Our vision rests on three pillars. First, honoring tradition by presenting work deeply rooted in the authentic repertoire, especially for audiences new to Bharatanatyam. Second, creating pieces relevant to our lives and contemporary contexts, inviting diverse audiences to connect personally. Third, blending the arts with science and medicine, reflecting our dual careers. This has led to unique explorations - from Shriya's workshops on biomechanics, to Explorations, which analyzed the navarasa through psychology and neuroscience, and to our work on Shiva's dance, which connects physics, philosophy, and the eternal truth of energy in transformation. In these ways, we bring science and art into dialogue, each illuminating the other.

Anita Vallabh: What does collaboration look like between the two of you?

Shriya & Joshua: We both come from very different stylistic traditions. One of us moves through the Kalakshetra style, sharp and expansive. The other through Vazhuvoor, where subtlety and grace lead the way. We also both come from distinct cultural backgrounds and experiences growing up. Our differences mean we debate almost every choice. Who are the characters? What is the message? Is this movement relevant and appropriate? Do we even need to tell this story for this audience? That kind of friction has made us extremely intentional about our choreography. Instead of falling back on what feels natural, we are pushed to consider structure and meaning at every step.

What makes our collaboration distinctive is that, unlike many artistic duos, we are not bound by family, style, geography, language, lineage, or guru. Our collaboration remains simply because we are drawn to the process itself, and because working together sharpens both of our creating instincts. Sustaining this partnership has required both resilience and discipline. Despite the inevitable tug-of-war, we are each highly organized and tenacious, and that has been essential to building and sustaining the company. Remarkably, we have only spent one year creating side by side in person. For the past nine years, our process has lived on Zoom, phone calls, sprawling Google documents, and WhatsApp chats, with occasional bursts of in-person time. It is the trust and deep understanding we built in that very first year that has sustained a now decade-long collaboration - proof that process and trust can fuel creativity across both distance and time.

Anita Vallabh: Shriya, could you tell us about your experiments with haptics, and what they've revealed to you about embodiment and perception in dance?

Shriya: In Fall 2024, we asked whether the experience of dance could be augmented for less-familiar viewers through the sensory modality of haptics, or touch, to more actively relay the complexity of the rhythms embedded in the choreography. As a resident artist at the ArtLab, I collaborated with the Harvard Bionics Lab to create wearable sensors that captured our footwork and mapped it to haptic sensations that are delivered through a mobile phone so viewers could feel the vibrations as they watched. Audiences, especially those less familiar with Indian dance, were especially excited about the augmented experience. You can see more about this project on PBS Nova's Build This series. This project was developed with Isabella Gomez, Krithika Swaminathan, Arushi Pant, and Arnab Dey.

Anita Vallabh: How do you approach innovation while staying rooted in tradition?

Shriya & Joshua: Innovation is not something we chase. We work within the traditional movement vocabulary of Bharatanatyam and let our intuition and creative desire guide the process rather than feeling pressure to present something "new", for the sake of novelty.

For example, in our most recent production, Explorations, we created a full-length piece on the concept of fear. This arose from our own reflections on the turmoil, uncertainty, and disharmony in the world around us - how fear seemed both to be generated by and to perpetuate more insecurity.

If there is innovation in our work, it lies in our thought process and in the way we conceive and portray our concept. For example, we've created a sanchari on the simple and relatable fear of spiders– the way they creep, crawl, hide under the bed. We stretched that fleeting moment of instinctive fear into minutes of choreography, then connected it back to broader questions of how fear evolves across a lifetime and how deeply it is wired in the brain. That layering of the everydaywith the universal, the personal with the scientific, is where our originality emerges. At heart, we see ourselves less as innovators and more as artists who follow where our minds and hearts lead, while staying rooted in the richness of tradition.

Anita Vallabh: How does performing in Chennai differ from performing in the U.S.? Is it the audience, the city's cultural history, or something more personal?

Shriya: The intensity of the culture, the density of artists, and the sheer energy of the season in Chennai is very addictive. Performing for a highly attuned rasika population also keeps me on my toes and makes every performance deeply rewarding.

In recent years, I have also found it equally meaningful to produce work in the United States. The audiences are more diverse and the reach often extends beyond the Indian community. With my mother, for example, I have co-created works that take on themes such as climate change, the swift passage of time, women's empowerment and other pressing social issues. It has been exciting to see people from many backgrounds connect with the art, relate to the stories, ask questions, and feel moved by the performance, to create an experience for them that is so unique and impactful.

The festivals outside India are creating valuable platforms of their own, and producing work for them comes with its own challenges and satisfactions. At the end of the day, I feel most fulfilled when the art can be a catalyst for reflection and dialogue on issues that matter.

Anita Vallabh: What excites you most about the upcoming Intersections conference and Anubhava's role in it?

Shriya & Joshua: Artists today are taking on unique projects with great depth and originality, and we are incredibly excited to be able to showcase the latest and greatest in our field. This conference will put an analytical lens on dance, to not only see the finished product but to hear directly from artists about what they created, why they created it, and the thought processes that shaped their work. That behind-the-scenes perspective is something we are especially eager to learn from, and we think audiences will value it too.

We hope this conference will help form a network of people, across geographies, generations, and disciplines, who can support one another. We plan to directly raise and address some of the major challenges facing the field, facilitating conversations that go from problem statements to potential solutions. For Anubhava, playing a role in sparking these kinds of dialogues is a true privilege, and we cannot wait to see what emerges from the conversation.

Premiere of "Flight of the Mind" for the opening of
the K. Lisa Yang Center for Bionics at the MIT Media Lab with Prof. Hugh Herr (2022).
Photo Credit: ***James Day.***

As we begin curating this conference, it feels especially meaningful that the launch of GIA coincides with this work. This platform offers exactly what our field needs: a living space where dialogue extends beyond any single event. The questions we will explore at Intersections demand ongoing engagement, accountability, and bold imagination. With GIA as a partner, we see this not just as a conference, but the start of a sustained journey– one that empowers artists, strengthens our community, and shapes the future of Indian classical dance in North America.

Anita Vallabh: How do you envision your future contributions to global conversations on Indian movement vocabulary?

Shriya & Joshua: There are many trends in Indian dance that are fueling positive growth, but there are also elements shaped by social media culture that, while visually striking for a 60-second reel, do not always carry the weight or rigor needed for long-form artistic work. We want to create greater awareness around the depth of thought and choreography that goes into meaningful productions and help audiences recognize and appreciate work that is authentic to the form.

Indian dance has an extraordinary movement vocabulary that theoretically makes it universally relevant. However, there arise many questions of relevance in terms of the work that is created. When an artist creates, is it for themselves, for the audience, or something in between? Should we continue with age-old themes, shift to new ones, or find balance between the two? These are questions we want to engage with directly, including through platforms like the Intersections conference.

Through Anubhava, we hope our work can serve as an example of what is possible: using traditional vocabulary to tell compelling, contemporary stories, building group choreography that approaches the scale and energy of a Broadway production, and exploring subjects that may sit outside traditional domains. We are also eager to test the dynamism of Bharatanatyam by engaging with frameworks from science and medicine, and seeing how the form's expressive and narrative power can bring those ideas to life. In the future, we want our contributions to show that Indian dance is not only timeless, but also boundless in what it can engage with and communicate.

Indian Dance in New York's Cultural Landscape:

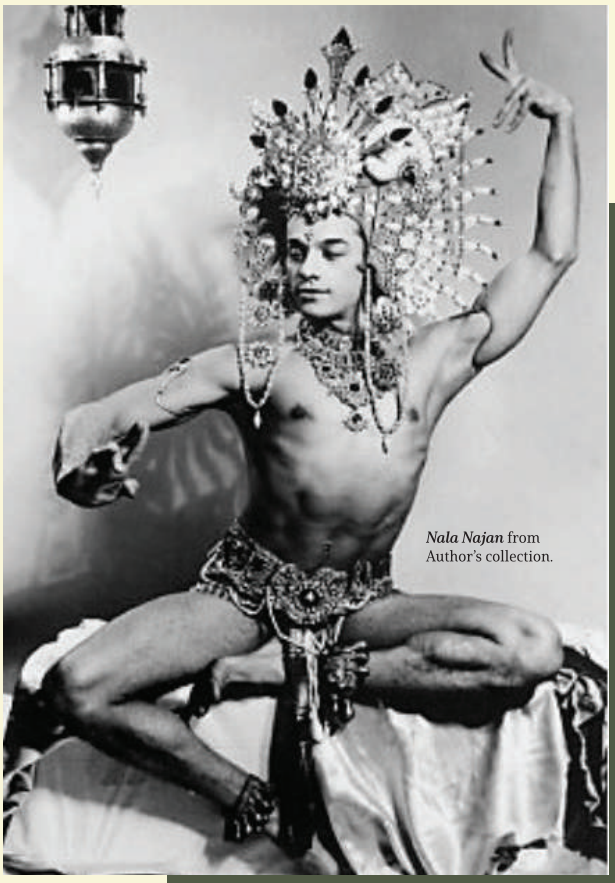
A Dancer's Memoir Across Cultures

*By **Uttara Asha Coorlawala, Ph.D***

A brief backwards look at Indian dancing in the rapidly changing demographics of multiple cultures in American cities, is tied in with the ways that communities negotiate Indianness at different locations and times. There is also question of how Indian dancers find their spaces within the larger frame of the American cultural arts ecology, with its own demands for accommodation. Now dance activity has not only multiple local centers but interacts crucially with the source community in India. The winter season in Chennai, for example, still serves as an active networking center for both renowned and emerging dancers from the UK, Malaysia, USA and elsewhere, as well as for dance critics, writers, and presenters.

In 1965 new immigration laws took effect whereby quotas based on national origin (now considered a euphemism for 'race') were abolished in favor of importing ready-made talent from a world-wide base. It was during this period (often referred to as the Brain-drain) that highly educated professional young South Asians emigrated to the United States, Canada and Britain. India at this time was in the throes of a heavily taxed socialist economy where opportunities for young persons were so competitive that many gratefully moved in to take advantage of opportunities outside the country. Immigration laws also privileged the entrance of family members, so that soon these single persons brought over wives, families, etc. and this trend has continued, changing the demographics of cities in Britain and also within the U.S.A.

My incomplete story starts here in 1964, when I came to the USA to study dance and to dance. It was the year of A Hard Day's Night – a strange song I kept hearing on every radio station. It was the year of the World's Fair in Queens, NY. India was represented, and Wikipedia observes that "developing nations were encouraged to show their art and culture rather than technology, and World's Fair officials pressured Islamic nations to emphasize their religion." So already in 1964, dance and handmade crafts stood for Indianness. At that time, Bhaskar Roy Chowdhury was dancing his famous, undoubtedly sensational and acrobatic item number, the Snake Dance, four times a day in the Radio City Music Hall. (I recollect marveling at the kind of stamina that would entail.) Despite being trained in dances of Kathakali, Bharatanatyam, Kathak and Manipuri, in press reports Bhaskar was known as "a folk dancer." He also acted in stage plays,



Nala Najan from Author's collection.

musicals and several motion pictures, most memorably as the hippie cult leader Horace Bones in the horror film I Drink Your Blood (1971).

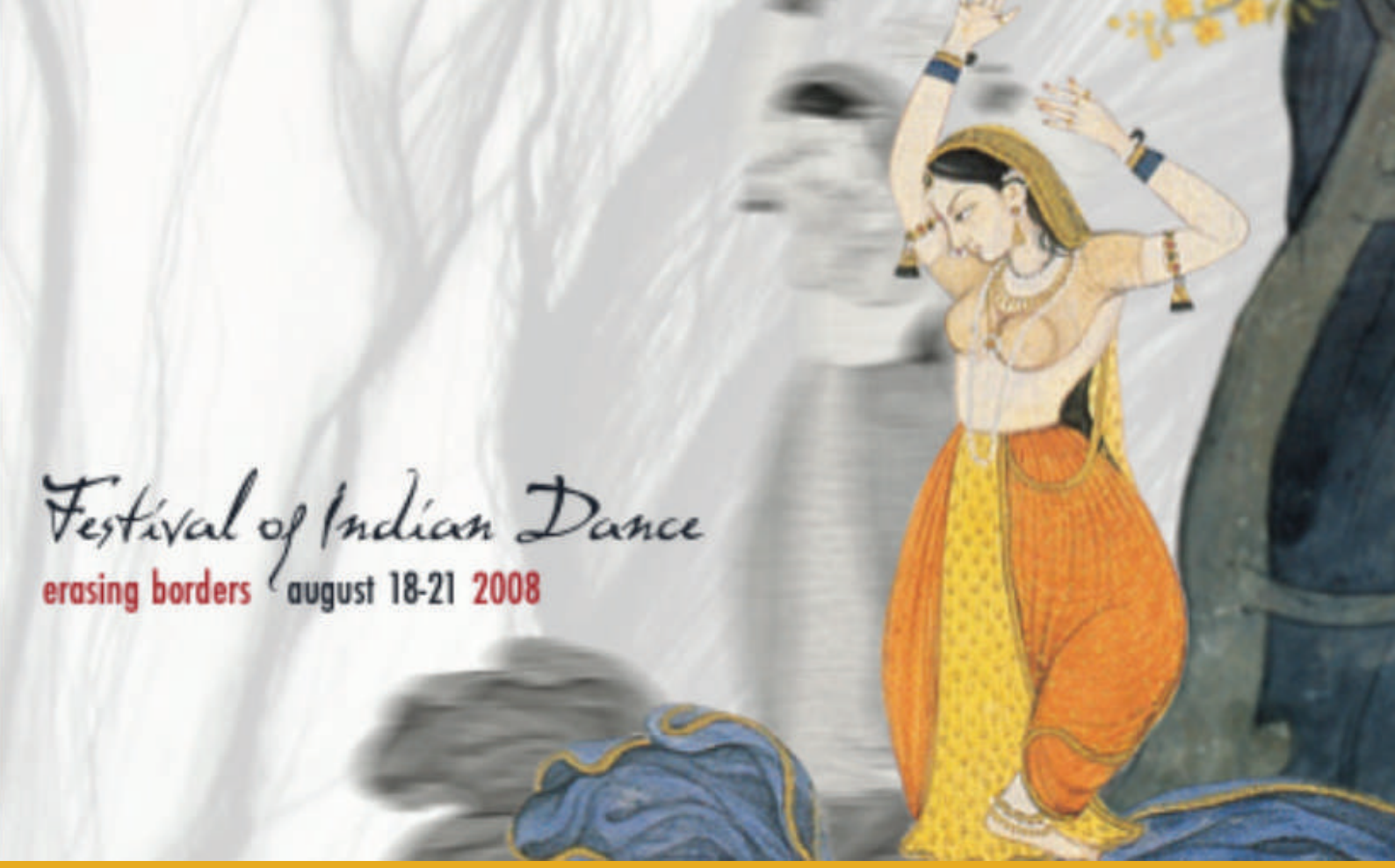
By the time Bhaskar was dancing in New York, Ted Shawn, Ruth St Denis, La Meri and Uday Shankar had already sowed seeds of fascination with "Indianness." Jack Cole, the veteran Broadway choreographer of the likes of Marilyn Monroe, had studied what we now call Bharatanatyam from La Meri and notoriously based his choreography for the tongue-in-cheek Broadway musical Kismet on it. Bhaskar went on to perform at the dance mecca, Jacob's Pillow, many times — a steady draw. Among a kind of cognoscenti, Indian dance (whatever form it took) was in. Also in the 60s-80s were two performers on the national concert circuit who presented Indian dances they had learned in India. Nala Najan performed Kathak, Chhau, and Bharatanatyam dances where he used Baroque music and traditional movement phrases. Matteo danced Natanam Aadhinaar and translated the Lord's Prayer into a padam. He also reconstructed La Meri's Hamsa Rani/Swan Lake and I especially recollect learning the dance of the four ducklings, a literal translation of the original Petipas en pointe choreography into Bharata Natyam idiom! Another very strong recollection is that whenever I danced with Matteo's company, (The Indo-American Dance Theater) and despite my protests, I was required to wear full body orange-brown tan makeup in order to look Indian- just like the other non-Indian members of the troupe.

Young American dancers raised grants to go to India and study the "authentic" forms with local gurus such as Balasaraswati, Birju

Maharaj-ji and Mrinalini Sarabhai. They returned to show their wares in the New York dance scene. In addition, there was an Asha Devi aka Esperanza aka Hope who danced Balinese, Kabuki, Bharatanatyam and Manipuri dances; Najma Ayesha (Kathak); and our Maya Kulkarni (Bharatanatyam), among others-devis-who performed in venues in the 70s. Ragini Devi, aka Esther Sherman, who had been in love with "Indian dance" since she was 8 years old, wrote a wonderful book Dance Dialects of India (whose first edition varies considerably from the re-edited version republished later) and carried fascinating glimpses into dance of that time. Her daughter Indrani became established as the icon of classical Indian dance. I recollect being present at the 92nd Street YMHA where she was awarded a key to New York City. In that performance she was accompanied by her artist-dancer daughter Sukanya Rehman while Rajika Puri did nattuvangam. Balasaraswati danced at Lincoln Center and wowed her audience with the depth of her expressivity. A contemporary of Indrani, the charming and bright scholar Ritha Devi from (then) Calcutta taught Mahari Odissi at NYU's School of Performing arts and performed often. And Sukhendu Dutt taught Manipuri. I know this writing can not be all inclusive but it hurts to leave anyone out, --so special and rare in NYC were these persons in my recollection.

In the case of the 1985–86 Festival of India in New York, Malavika Sarukkai, Birju Maharaj, and Raja and Radha Reddy were prominent among those selected who performed at Lincoln Center. In 1985 the Cold War was still in play, international travel was very restricted and so the stakes were very high for performers from India to be selected. At that time, the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (a branch of the Foreign Service) was represented by the Indo-U.S. Subcommission in New York. The Indo-U.S. Subcommission was funded by PL 480 funds (Rupee funds paid by the Indian government to repay loans from the U.S. government) and by the U.S.I.A. This organization facilitated culture, education and media exchanges between the United States and India, but dance played only a minor part on its agenda. The Indo-U.S. Subcommission clarified at that time that it did not present, or select performers, or coordinate requests from private organizations in the United States that wished to sponsor visiting artists. However, it did channel grants to Americans wishing to visit India for cultural purposes.

Despite solitary stars, there was no real Indian dance community in New York – but cutthroat competition for the few performing spots available. Both Mallika Sarabhai and Astad Deboo commiserated with me that people did not seem to think Indians could "do" modern dance (Sheela Raj, who danced with Twyla Tharp, being the exception). Both shared my experience that contemporary dance organizations referred them to heritage organizations who in turn rejected them as being inauthentic representatives of their own cultures. In fact, most of the cross- or intercultural work that was bruited as happening were situations where White Americans were in charge and hired Indians only to "learn" from them so as to inculcate their perspectives and contributions into their own work. I noticed that I was always welcomed as a contributor/dancer but never as a choreographer, although my work was acclaimed in India.



In the 1990s this would change with Chandralekha opening the gate that many could then enter. In 1993 and later in 2001 there were notable Kalanidhi International Indian Dance Conferences in Toronto organized by the late Sudha Thacker Khandwani, her brother Rasesh Thakkar and Odissi dancer Menaka Thakkar. They were stellar affairs graced by scholars such as Kapila Vatsyayan and Ananya Chatterjea, dance critics like Marcia Siegel, Dr. Sunil Kothari, and Simon Dove, and dancers such as Malavika Sarukkai, Daksha Sheth, Chandralekha and myself among others. It seemed Indian dance with all its classical and modern variations had arrived. In Houston, dancer Rathna Papa Kumar, and in California Viji Prakash (Bharatanatyam) and Chitresh Das (Kathak), and in Chicago Hema Rajagopalan, had established their schools and international festivals.

Back in New York, Jonathan Hollander, trailblazed sponsoring Indian dance since his founding of Battery Dance Festival in Lower Manhattan in 1982. Battery Dance Festival still has enthusiastic supporters for all their shows including the one show per festival that is dedicated to Indian dance. Jonathan, who is constantly travelling the world, curates with a keen eye for what is happening in dance.

In New York, in 2008 when I was invited with Prachi Dalal to curate a contemporary edgy Indian dance festival called Erasing Borders I was very excited. The festival was sponsored by the Indo-American Arts Council, then founded by the indomitable Aroon Shivdasani. The following year our dance curating team was joined by no less than Rajika Puri. We were grateful and excited to share with New Yorkers the gamut of Indian dance, from contemporary to classical, from vernacular to Bollywood and avant garde… It was the first time we could self-contextualize ourselves. Maha-celebration. Even the New York Times reviewer Alastair Macaulay in 2013 called it “one of the highlights of New York’s dance year.”

Pranamya Suri

Odissi Dance Company

Chitresh Das
Dance Company

Nrityanjali

IAAC
INSPIRE · ENGAGE · CONNECT

Rovaco Dance Company

Celebrating India's Independence
with the Artists Performing at the
Erasing Borders Dance Festival 2025

Marking the occasion with a showcase of
exceptional Indian dance on the New York stage.

Preeti Vasudevan

Priyadarsini Govind

Trina Sarkar

Kalanidhi

Rama Vaidyanathan trio

2018 was a very sad year as it marked the conclusion of Erasing Borders Dance Festivals. However, new knights in shining armor riding their white horses appeared magically to revitalize the Indian dance scene. A new board led by Dr. Nirmal Mattoo, Rakesh Kaul and other New York Indian business persons took over the Indo-American Arts Council with intent to showcase Indian culture and revived the IAAC Film, Literature, Arts and Dance festivals. Suman Gollamundi provided continuity as she stepped up to be Executive Director and so Erasing Borders Dance was up and running again in 2019 with a new agenda and fresh sets of directives. And we are still here. IAAC has been expanding its community steadily. In the meanwhile, the World Music Festival with Rajika Puri at the helm launched the Dancing the Gods Festival. New York City also hosts Drive East and the summer festival in Queens, which continue to sponsor Indian dance. With all this activity, one cannot get complacent about Indian dance in New York; one has to stay fresh and reinvent with sensitivity to changing times.-

Today, with so much activity, Indian dance in New York resists complacency. To thrive, it must continue to stay fresh, reinventing itself while responding sensitively to changing times. The story of Indian dance here is one of negotiation, resilience, and renewal—rooted in India, yet deeply intertwined with American cultural life. This story, at once personal and collective, remains a living memoir of Indian dance across cultures.

The EPIC Choir
Reimagining Carnatic Music for a Global Stage

*By **Shankar Santhanagopalan***

Sishyakulam's EPIC Choir from ***Cleveland Thyagaraja Festival*** 2025.
Photo Credit: ***Hari N Iyer.***

Growing up in Chennai in a family of Carnatic musicians, and as both a singer and a mridangam artiste, I recognize that I have been one of the most privileged inheritors of the Indian arts — blessed with access, mentorship, and exposure from an extraordinarily young age. Yet this privilege also gave me a vantage point. Over time, I began to see not only the beauty of the ecosystem I was part of, but also its fragilities.

The first was impossible to ignore, almost a cliché: dwindling audiences. For as long as I can remember, the standard conversation between Carnatic musicians in the first quarter of any year has been a rueful comparison of Margazhi audiences —

Sishyakulam's EPIC Choir in Malaysia in collaboration with Sugam Karnatica, an arts institution based in Kuala Lumpur. 2024

"Ah, the crowds this year were sparser than last, weren't they?" From my earliest concert-going years in 2008 through 2020, the erosion was visible, undeniable.

Then came the great disruptor: Covid-19. Ironically, I owe the pandemic a strange gratitude. It shattered my denial, forced acceptance, and pushed me to action. Through years of dinner-table debates, green room exchanges, and on-stage discussions with my father, Neyveli Santhanagopalan, the thought crystallized: the problem was not the music, but its packaging. The art was rich, profound, timeless; but its presentation no longer resonated, especially with the young. What Carnatic music needed was a format that respected tradition yet reimagined its experience.

That is how the EPIC Choir was born: a choral ensemble of at least a hundred young voices, standing together on one stage, carrying Carnatic music into spaces of scale, inclusivity, and impact. Conceived in 2015, this idea has since been tested and celebrated across cultural landscapes — USA, UK, Dubai, Singapore, Malaysia, Australia — each time reaffirming its power to transform how the arts are experienced and sustained.

“If you want to go fast,
go alone. If you want to go far,
go together,”

says an old African proverb.

I recently heard A.R. Rahman remark, “The sun is setting for the orchestras in the West, but it is rising in the East.” The Carnatic choir, especially at the scale of Sishyakulam’s EPIC Choir, was envisioned precisely for that rising: to create impact. Impact for audiences, for young learners, for teachers, and for the future of Indian classical arts.

Over time, the choir has grown beyond being just a performance format. It has become a movement — one that reimagines pedagogy, strengthens community, and demonstrates that Indian classical music can be both timeless and radically relevant. By creating scale, fostering inclusivity, and inviting fresh collaborations, the EPIC Choir continues to show that tradition does not diminish when shared; it expands.

As a result of these efforts, on April 19, 2025, the 45th Cleveland Thyagaraja Festival witnessed history as the 8th edition of Sishyakulam’s EPIC Choir brought together over 250 participants from 20 states across the United States, ranging from five-year-old children to sixty-year-old adults. More than 75% of the participants were under 14, and over 700 family members traveled, including two flights filled entirely with choir families. The event generated an economy of $250,000 and over 30,000 hours of collective effort. With support from 40 Gurus across three continents, the Wolstein Stadium hosted over 2,000 audience members for a performance that featured 25 ragams and seven instruments — violin, flute, veena, keyboard, mridangam, tabla, and ghatam. As a mark of gratitude, Sishyakulam donated $15,000 to the festival. It was one of the largest stage events in Indian classical music history — a resounding affirmation of what the future of the arts can look like.

Looking ahead, the vision remains bold. In 2026, the choir will mark three anniversaries of historic significance: the 250th anniversary of U.S. independence, the 80th year of India’s independence, and the 250th birth anniversary of composer Muthuswamy Dikshitar. With a U.S. tour planned, work has already begun.

Classical concerts may take place every day around the world, but the events that truly leave a mark are those that bring hundreds of voices together, create community, and offer global visibility. This is the gift of the EPIC Choir — reminding us that Carnatic music, at its heart, is not just about art itself but about scale, belonging, and impact.

CULTURAL STEWARDSHIP

Milap: Building Bridges, Shaping Communities

By Alok Nayak

For forty years, Milap has stood as a bridge between Indian heritage and cultural life. What began as a community-led initiative in Liverpool has grown into the leading Indian arts and culture company internationally — producing world-class performances, developing ensembles, and nurturing generations of young musicians and dancers. Beneath the concerts and festivals lies something less visible yet equally vital: the craft of arts management, and its role in shaping the experience of diaspora communities.

When I began my career, I wasn't even aware that "arts management" existed. Over time I realised it was the hidden architecture that made so much possible — where creativity and organisation meet, and identity and representation are constantly negotiated.

At Milap, arts management has never been a purely logistical function. It has always been an act of cultural stewardship — negotiating between heritage and innovation, communities and institutions, tradition and the contemporary. Every project requires a balance of planning, funding, programming, and audience engagement. Yet what sets Milap apart is how these choices have been tied to questions of identity, belonging, and representation.

When the organisation launched its Samyo and Tarang ensembles, for example, it was not simply a managerial decision. It was an intervention in cultural practice: offering South Asian musicians a pathway to professional development, visibility on major stages, and the chance to create new traditions together. The ensembles were managed with rigour, but also with sensitivity to the lived realities of diaspora artists — many navigating dual identities, or forging careers outside conventional Indian classical pathways.

Milap's programmes have had a ripple effect far beyond individual concerts. Festivals such as Indika have brought leading Indian artists to stages internationally, inspiring young audiences to see themselves reflected in global artistry. Initiatives like Instruments India and school workshops have embedded South Asian music and dance into classrooms, normalising cultural

diversity in education. Partnerships with major venues have ensured Indian arts are part of the international cultural calendar, not just niche offerings.

I still remember one evening when a young violinist from our ensemble came off stage, wide-eyed, after performing alongside a world-renowned maestro. She said quietly, "I never thought someone like me could belong here." For me, that sentence captured everything Milap tries to do: create spaces where belief takes root, where talent feels possible, and where the next generation can see themselves not as outsiders, but as artists in their own right.

And there are countless other memories of sharing art in unusual spaces — Carnatic music in a parish church near Lake Windermere, early morning ragas at Dartington Hall, or a day when 250 dancers performed to 1,000 people in Manchester. In most cases, we have shared with audiences from many diverse backgrounds, breaking boundaries of geography, faith, and culture in the process.

Of course, this journey has not been without its challenges. Arts management in the diaspora often involves working with limited resources, fluctuating funding, and the need to constantly advocate for the value of Indian classical and contemporary forms. It requires navigating systems shaped by Western frameworks, while ensuring Indian aesthetics and values remain authentic.

Yet these challenges have also led Milap to innovate. By professionalising ensembles, strengthening governance, and documenting work through platforms such as MilapSpace, the organisation has shown how diaspora arts can thrive with resilience and vision. Good management is not at odds with creativity; it enables it.

At Milap, many of the team, including myself, embody the diaspora identities we serve. Our decisions are shaped by personal experiences of migration, hybridity, and cultural negotiation. When we design a youth residency, curate a festival programme, or produce a recording, weare not only managers but also custodians of memory and identity. This lived connection is perhaps what makes Milap's approach distinct — we do not manage arts at a distance; we live them.

One of the great joys of Milap's journey has been the privilege of working with artists. Don't just present them, we look after them. We listen to what they need, give them space to grow, and build relationships that last far beyond a single concert. For us, this care is as important as the stage itself, because when artists feel supported, respected, and inspired, they give their best, and audiences feel that difference.

As Milap celebrates its 40th anniversary, the future lies in deepening this dual role: as cultural producers and cultural managers. We are asking ourselves: how can we continue to inspire belief in the next generation of artists? How can we ensure Indian arts are not only preserved but also evolve meaningfully internationally? And how can arts management become a tool for empowerment, rather than a constraint?

The answers lie in continuing to build platforms that are both rigorous and imaginative. Platforms that nurture creativity, while negotiating the realities of funding, audiences, and representation. Platforms that honour the past, while creating space for bold new voices.

Milap's journey shows that arts management is far more than administration; it is the architecture of cultural life. It makes possible the encounters that change lives — when a young person sees an Indian musician on stage and thinks, "I can do that too." It ensures diaspora communities feel seen, and enables traditions to travel, adapt, and inspire.

In celebrating 40 years, Milap is not only looking back at achievements, but forward to the stories yet to be written — where arts management continues to serve as both a tool of organisation and a vehicle of transformation.

Wellbeing & Ecology
Earth's Echo

By Neena Alapatt

As a child, I was enchanted by the world of needlework, particularly cross stitch. The intricate patterns and vibrant colors captivated me, and I spent hours perfecting my stitches. My classmates and I would often compete to create the most beautiful pieces, and our teacher would display our work for everyone to admire. We were always on the lookout for the finest cross stitch cloth, and I developed a keen eye for texture and quality.

As I settled into my life in the US, I found myself captivated by the humble onion and garlic bags. The mesh texture reminded me of the cross-stitch cloth I had loved as a child, and I was determined to rescue them from the waste stream. I began collecting them, unsure of how I would use them, but driven by a desire to give them a new life.

Around the same time, I inherited a collection of discarded CDs from my husband's decluttering efforts. As I experimented with cutting them up, I was struck by the resemblance to the traditional mirror work of Gujarat, a craft that had long fascinated me.

The way the light danced off the cut CDs was mesmerizing, and I knew I had to incorporate them into my art. As I combined the onion and garlic bags, cut CDs, and wool (which was a donation from my friend who wasn't sure what to do with it), a large and intricate piece of cloth began to take shape. But it wasn't until I stumbled upon a pile of discarded newspapers that the true inspiration for my piece emerged. The newspapers added a new dimension to my work, and I found myself drawn to the possibilities of paper mâché. The combination of these disparate materials sparked a creative fusion, and my art began to take on a life of its own..

And so, "Earth's Echo" was born - a powerful and emotive sculpture that conveys the earth's desperate cry for help. By repurposing discarded materials, I aimed to create a poignant reminder of the devastating impact of waste and excess on our planet.

Through this piece, I hope to inspire a sense of urgency and responsibility in viewers, encouraging them to reevaluate their relationship with the earth and take action to reduce their environmental footprint. By sparking a critical conversation about sustainability, I aim to contribute to a collective effort to protect our planet and ensure a healthier future for generations to come.

Synergies:
The Intersection of Yoga and Nātyam (Part 1)

By Nrithya Jagannathan

Yoga is a Vaidika darśana (philosophy derived from the Veda-s, the source of all Indian Knowledge traditions) with its ultimate goal being the attainment of kaivalyam, the liberation of the human soul from its embodied existence. The pathway of the Yogasūtra delineates the importance of regulating the mind and developing the mind to its highest state of sattvaśuddhi (sustained and unbroken clarity) through meditation.

Sahaṛdyatvam (a shared resonance of emotional space) is the goal of all art forms, for art to the artiste, is a journey from form to the formless, from the gross to the subtle and from the drama of the outer realms to the solitude of the inner. It is this inward journey that is also the heart of Yoga.

Core Teachings of the Yogasūtra

Yogasūtra, which closely follows the perspective of Sāmkhya (another school of philosophy deriving from the Veda-s), is considered the foremost classical text wholly focused on the subject of Yoga. Attributed to Maharṣi Patañjali, the Yogasūtra contains 195 sūtra-s spread across 4 chapters. The Yogasūtra essentially is a text that clearly explains the nature of the human mind, its potentials and limitations and how the human mind can be trained to the very highest refinement enabling it to attain and sustain a state of meditative absorption known as samādhi. Samadhi is classified into two - sabīja and nirbīja. Sabīja Samādhi comprises multiple progressive stages of mental refinement, culminating in superlative levels of mental acuity known as siddhi. While the siddhi-s are the outcome of yogasādhana (the consistent practice of Yoga), the highest state of mind desired through the practice

of yoga is viveka, the unwavering realisation of Puruṣa (consciousness) as the unchanging permanent source that empowers the dṛśyam (mind) while eternally remaining separate from it and therefore, a witness to the activities of the mind, but never itself transforming. This discernment is the pathway leading the sadhaka eventually to nirbīja samādhi or kaivalyam, a liberation from the cyclicality of birth, life and death on account of the play of karma (the web of previous choices and their outcomes).

The structure of the Yogasūtra is as follows:

Samādhi Pādaḥ - Comprising 51 Sūtra-s, this chapter defines the concept of Yoga, highlighting the experience of Samādhi (a state of deep meditative absorption) as the goal, eventually leading to liberation. It also discusses the problems encountered in reaching the state of Yoga and how these problems can be overcome. This chapter is considered by commentators to be addressed to an audience that is already familiar with the core principles of Consciousness, mind and their relationship, thus, requiring a subtle guidance to further walk the path.

Sādhana Pādaḥ – The second chapter contains 55 Sūtra-s and seems to be addressed to the average person, like you and me: one who experiences great joy and also grieves deeply, who acts to gratify the ego and who often is overcome by fear and worry. Starting from the beginning, Patañjali helps us understand the nature and limitations of the mind, also guiding us patiently and skilfully towards our potential and presents practical solutions to develop the qualities needed to change the mind gradually from a state of distraction to a state of attention.

Vibhūti Pādaḥ – The third chapter contains 55 Sūtra-s and presents the various Siddhi-s or unique powers that arise from sustained practices that progressively broaden the scope of the mind's capabilities. Incredible power comes from great knowledge, but knowledge can bind or set us free.

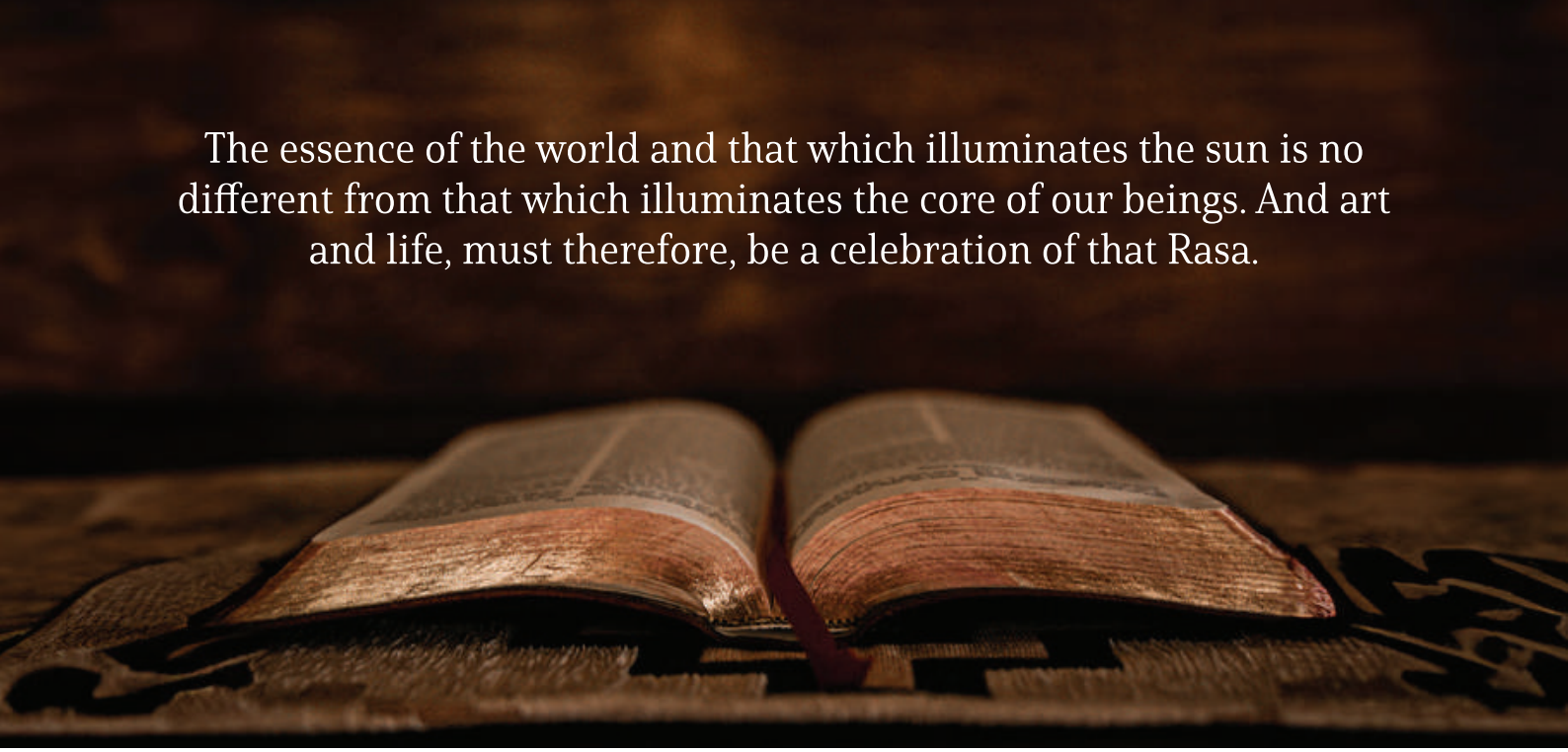
This chapter also stresses that such unique abilities may become sources of distraction and prevent the person from reaching the highest state of clarity, and thence, Kaivalyam, which is the ultimate purpose of Yoga.

Kaivalya Pādaḥ – Comprising 34 Sūtra-s, this chapter emphasises the role played by a competent teacher in enabling a mental transformation, what holds us back from embracing such transformation and the possibilities that unfold for a person who has a highly refined mind.

As renowned Yoga master, TKV Desikachar, summarises succinctly in his book, **The Heart of Yoga**, "Yoga is the ability to direct the mind exclusively in one direction and to sustain that focus for a certain period of time without distraction."

While yoga today is mostly conflated with āsana (practice of postures), it is vital to remember that it is a Vaidika Darśana that is entirely ādhyātmika (inward oriented) in nature. Yoga involves:

- Discipline in diet, lifestyle, work and study patterns, exercise with a view to refining and strengthening the body and mind.
- Honest unbiased introspection and evaluation of one's thoughts and actions.
- Acting with humility, accepting one's limitations, without anticipating gain or loss.
- Understanding that every one of us is a part of an interconnected whole and that it is only in the harmony of the whole can each of its parts also be in harmony and stability.
- Facilitation of a deep awareness of the inherent connection between body, breath and mind. When the mind is slowly trained to meditate, it can reflect the nature of the soul within.
- Awareness that there is a larger cosmic order at play (ṛtam) and while the mind appears to be powerful, in reality its role is limited to being a faithful instrument for the Consciousness within.



- The realization of the all-pervasive and omniscient nature of īśvara (the Supreme Consciousness), to accept changes in one's path with equanimity and to align oneself to these changes without fear, anger or regret.

In other words, Yoga makes us the very best that we can be in everything that we take up, so that we become suitable vessels to receive and hold devine grace.

The depiction of a character on stage is the outcome of a three-phased meditative process that begins well before. This process of an immersive state of meditation is well seen be it in sculpture, art, music or dance. The sculptor who creates a form of the divine has to meditate on the particular form of God. There are dhyana sloka-s on every deity that are to be recited prior to commencing his work. Through this, he discovers the figure within the block of stone and then removes the unwanted material to reveal its form. If he is able to reveal the form that he meditated on, then that image will always radiate tranquillity. The dhyana of the sculptor has been permanently crafted for posterity on the stone.

It is this same principle that applies as we move from the outer prāhāram (external circumambulatory passages around the temple) to the innermost garbhagriha in a temple – a movement where we observe and absorb the outer worlds, integrate their symbolism into our very beings and then seek what lies within the depths of our heart. This is the process of meditation. Not for nothing does Kalidasa proclaim so emphatically, in Mālavikāgnimitram, "nāṭyaṁ bhinnarucerjanasya bahudhāpyekaṁ samārādhanam."

Samārādhana is an offering that is meant to gratify, to please and to propitiate. And if nāṭyaṁ is to be the means of samārādhanam to people of diverse interests, then it follows that the onus lies on the performer who carries forth a chosen theme with the intention of creating an experience of sahṛdayatva in the audience. For that ultimately is the purpose of nāṭya in any form. The same is true of the dancer who seeks to depict any character. Only then can nāṭya achieve the purpose it was intended for – samārādhana.
In the words of Swami Chinmayananda, **"If you bring the entire mind to what you are doing at any moment, it is Yoga and it is Pūjā or worship. Then, you do not have to run after success. Success starts running after you. Thereafter, work is no longer labour, but joyous life itself, in which there is peace of mind."**

The final story that this tapestry reveals is but one – the story of what we are seeking lies in the heart. The Taittiriya Upanisad says, "Raso vai sah." That Brahman is indeed Rasa. The essence of the world and that which illuminates the sun is no different from that which illuminates the core of our beings. And art and life, must therefore, be a celebration of that Rasa.

Cultivating Your Own Local Maxima

By Sanjay Rao Chaganti

About a week ago, Anita (the editor of this very Magazine) asked me if I'd write a piece about my upcoming trip to the Maldives. Anita is not just an editor to me—she's a very dear friend whom I've known for decades. Over the years we've seen each other grow, change, and perhaps become a little more inward-focused. That long friendship brings a lot of trust; so when she asked, I said yes without hesitation.

I assumed she meant a breezy travelogue—something about turquoise waters, pristine white beaches, maybe a story about snorkeling and the insights that surface when you're forty feet underwater with only a turtle for company. But as life often does, it handed me a different theme.

The Fifth Time's the Charm

A few days before the trip, my daughter flew in from New York. I had set myself a small (but not insignificant) goal: to finally complete an online course in Tibetan Buddhism - shorter than War and Peace, but still not exactly comic-strip reading. Now, a confession: this was not my first attempt. I had enrolled twice for the year-long program. Dropped out both times. Tried the six-month version. Dropped out again. Even roped in friends for moral support. Still didn't happen. This time, though, I signed up for a four-month version. And—I can hardly believe I'm typing this—I completed it. Even sat for the final test. And passed! Fifth attempt. Cue the confetti.

So what was different? The syllabus hadn't changed. The monks were still monks. The content was still deep.

The difference was Sandeep.

From left to right: ***Lata Murugan, Sanjay Rao Changati, Sanjana Chaganti.***

The Power of a Role Model

Sandeep was one of my fellow study partners. Unlike me (who thrives on bursts of enthusiasm and multiple half-finished projects), he has the gift of execution. Pick a task, stay with it, complete it. Quietly, diligently, humbly.

While the rest of us scrambled to catch up, Sandeep was always ahead—consistently sharing his neatly summarized notes, reminding us what "discipline" looks like in real life. When he announced he'd finished the program and passed the exam, I felt an unmistakable kick in the backside. "If he can do it, Sanjay, so can you." That push got me over the finish line.

Snorkeling at Dawn
This theme of learning from others carried into the Maldives trip itself. We went with another family this time, and our friend Sumit became the invisible choreographer of our days. Sumit is one of those maddeningly energetic people who thinks 6 a.m. is a great time to start life. Because of him, our schedule looked like this:
Snorkeling between 7:00 and 8:30 am.
Breakfast.
Midday games and volleyball.
Afternoon snorkeling again.
More games.
Lights out by 9:00 p.m.

Compare this to our usual family pattern: leisurely mornings, one activity (two if ambitious), late nights. Left to ourselves, we would never have packed in so much living. But following Sumit's rhythm, I experienced the Maldives in a whole new way. Even my wife and daughter—normally less gung-ho about physical exertion than I am—were swept into this current of activity.
Role models at work again.

Lessons from Bharatanatyam
This idea isn't new. I see it in my daughter's Bharatanatyam classes. The teacher has students ranging from five to twenty-five, sometimes older. The younger ones watch the seniors with wide eyes, copying gestures and stamina. The seniors, in turn, are sharpened by the responsibility of being observed.
Everyone benefits. The "local maxima"—those who are just a little further along—become sources of inspiration. And then the torch keeps moving.

A Mathematical Aside (Humor Me)
Mathematicians have a phrase: local maxima. A point that is higher than its immediate neighbors, though not necessarily the highest in the universe.

The author in his *characteristic expansive pose.*

Imagine a group of people averaging 4½ feet in height. A person who's 5'4" is their local maxima. They may not be the tallest player on the basketball court, but in that group, they stand tall.

That's what I mean: **find your local maxima. Not superhuman paragons. Not perfect icons. Just someone in your circle who embodies a quality you want to grow into—discipline, generosity, non-judgment, creativity.**

Coming Home with a New Lens
Back from the trip, I made a list of the people I spend the most time with and noted what each was particularly good at. One friend is a tireless giver. Another, deeply non-judgmental. A third can connect with anyone, anywhere. A fourth radiates discipline.

Then I asked myself: which of these qualities do I most want to cultivate this year? The answers came clear:
1. Be more of a giver.
2. Be less judgmental.
So I've set myself a small experiment: spend more time with these particular friends, observe how they live these values, talk to them about it. Let their strengths rub off on me.

Why This Matters for Artists
If you're a dancer, a musician, a painter—you know this instinctively. You grow not just by practicing alone in a room, but by placing yourself among others whose artistry stretches you. By watching someone take a raga or a jati or a brushstroke a little further than you've gone.
Inspiration isn't abstract. It's embodied.
And often, it's not about finding "the best in the world." It's about finding the best in your world, right now. Your local maxima.
Cultivate them. Learn from them. Let them quietly reshape you. Because whether it's completing a stubborn online course, snorkeling at dawn, or dancing until your anklets sing—sometimes the surest way to grow is simply to stand near someone who already has. And maybe that's the gift of long friendships too, like mine with Anita. People who've walked beside you for decades, trusted you through your unfinished drafts and your half-baked ideas, and believed something worthwhile would eventually emerge. More often than not—they're right.

Am I Swastha?

By Dr. Madhumita

'How are you?' is probably the first question many ask us in a social setting or even a phone call.

'You are glowing', 'you are looking good' or 'are you ok? You seem a bit under the weather today'. These are statements made when people look at us and are able to gauge. What are these subtle signals our body is displaying that people pick up and ask us these questions?

When we reply saying 'Thank you I am doing great', 'I am feeling good', or 'Yeah I have been a bit unwell, doing better now.' We are talking about our health. What is this health? How is it defined? According to the WHO, health is "a state of complete physical, mental and social well being not merely the absence of disease or infirmity." Honestly, how many of us understand the meaning of these words?

Is there maybe a simpler set of features that we could relate to that could indicate to us if we are healthy or not? I think all of us would like to know if we are healthy, as it is a well-known saying that health is wealth. In the present day particularly where health care centres and wellness centres have started popping up to prevent the onset of diseases and promote health.

This concept of preventive care is beautifully explained in the science of Ayurveda. The primary aim of this science says " | **Swasthasya swāsthya raksanam, āturasyavikāra praśamanam** ||" This translates to: once you have identified that a person is healthy, primarily protect, preserve and promote the health of the Swastha (healthy individual). If even beyond our efforts there is an onset of disease, then we will treat the disease.

How do we identify this Swastha or healthy individual? A series of aphorisms are described to explain the features and characteristics to identify health.

The first characteristic that pops up indicative of health is the presence of a good appetite. It is pretty interesting how such a simple feature can get so complicated, when people are asked this question, they have to think if they actually have a good appetite or not.

We can further subdivide this question into three parts to make it easy. The first is the presence of a desire to eat food, which is pretty straightforward. The second part is to enjoy the food while consuming it. This is not so common, for people who have excessive hunger due to an underlying disease such as obesity, hyperthyroidism, diabetes most times they say we don't really taste the food, they say we have

to eat otherwise we feel very uncomfortable. Hence the link between being hungry which leads to the desire for food, and when you are actually hungry you truly enjoy the taste of the food, even if it were the simplest meal. The thirdand final part is that this food consumed gets digested in a proper amount of time, neither too long nor too short. And finally, the proper assimilation of the well digested food material.

The next feature is the proper expulsion of the excreta which are feces, urine, flatus again linking back to a proper digestive capability.

The next feature that pops up indicative of health is good quality sleep. Not the number of hours, but rather the feeling. You get up in the morning feeling refreshed, rejuvenated, ready to face the day with whatever challenges it may throw at you. In the present day with gadgets defining your sleep quality, the inherent experience seems to be getting lost.

Then comes the feature of inherent happiness. Not needing a reason to feel happy, but just that the whole being is in a state of upliftment, enjoyment and health. This is commonly expressed as I am not so anxious or stressed about things that previously used to make me feel down.

Good strength is something that comes from the tissues being well nourished and healthy. A good, healthy complexion irrespective of the color of the skin. This would mean a healthy glow, this is one of those subtle characteristics

that people pick up on, and when they look at you comment that your body is exuding health.
All of these features in a way link back to a well-functioning Agni or what is termed Samagni in Ayurveda. Hence if we are able to maintain a healthy digestive fire, Swastha or health is a natural consequence.

The ways to prevent onset of disease and maintain Swastha are explained under three major categories termed Trayupasthambha or the three pillars that support health. The three pillars are Ahara (food), Nidra (sleep) and Brahmacharya (regulated activities of an individual).
Hence, why don't we assess our own wellness features and identify if we are Swastha?

Optimal well-being

By Dr. Sagar Vallabh

Positive health is not just the absence of disease, but a state of optimal well-being; a state of balance and vitality, a feeling of being at ease in one's body during everyday activity. The World Health Organization reminds us that health is "a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being." Here, I will turn to just one essential dimension: our physical health, the foundation upon which energy and movement can flourish.

While several factors contribute to a person's wellbeing, one major factor that often pulls us away from a healthy life is excess weight. In the United States today, nearly two-thirds of adults are overweight — and this pattern is steadily becoming more prevalent in other countries to varying degrees. Genetics, hormones, and medical conditions certainly play a role, but the most powerful influences come from our daily choices: too many calories, ultra-processed foods, sugary drinks, and a sedentary lifestyle. Why does this matter? Because carrying excess weight sets off a chain reaction creating a biological environment that promotes inflammation, disrupts hormones, and increases insulin resistance. Over time, this can heighten the risk of conditions like type 2 diabetes, heart disease, stroke, and even certain cancers. Recognizing this link is the first step toward reclaiming balance, energy, and health.

I offer some simple, easy to follow suggestions — small steps that can be woven into daily life and, over time, create a lasting impact:

Timing Matters as Much as Quantity

When it comes to caloric intake it's not just about what we eat, but when. Research shows that calories consumed late in the day lead to more weight gain. Our metabolism follows a circadian rhythm: insulin sensitivity is highest in the morning, allowing carbohydrates to be processed efficiently. As the day progresses, insulin sensitivity declines, making it easier for glucose to be stored as fat.

Late meals also impair sleep quality, which in turn disrupts hunger (ghrelin) and satiety (leptin) hormones, leading to increased appetite. An old adage captures this well: “Breakfast like a king, lunch like a queen, and supper like a pauper.”

Central Obesity: The Hidden Risk

Beyond general obesity, a more subtle though equally dangerous problem is central obesity—fat accumulation around the abdomen and more importantly inside the abdomen in the form of visceral fat.. This “visceral fat” wraps around internal organs and is metabolically active, releasing inflammatory chemicals and fatty acids that worsen insulin resistance, blood pressure, and cholesterol profiles.

It doesn’t take much visceral fat to cause trouble. Less than 0.5 kg is normal; over 1 kg is considered high-risk. More important than absolute weight is the ratio of visceral fat to skeletal muscle mass. Indians in general have a smaller muscle mass, raising this ratio and partly explaining why India now accounts for more than a quarter of global diabetes cases—over 212 million.

The TOFI Paradox

Alarmingly, one can appear slim yet harbor dangerous fat deposits. This condition is called TOFI—Thin Outside, Fat Inside. You may be aware of members within your own family with normal overall weight but with central obesity who could have the same potential risks. DEXA scans provide the most accurate measure of visceral fat, and awareness of TOFI can help individuals adopt healthier practices.

Food Quality: The Glycemic Index

I would like to discuss the Glycemic Index of foods because it has a direct bearing on the subject of weight control.

Glycemic index (GI) ranks carbohydrate-rich foods by how quickly they raise blood glucose. High-GI foods cause rapid insulin spikes followed by crashes that trigger fatigue, hunger, and cravings. Over time, this pattern drives insulin resistance, fat storage, and chronic disease.

One of the biggest culprits is rice and I bring this up because it is a staple for so much of the Indian population. While sugar has a GI of about 65, white rice can reach 90—meaning it raises blood glucose faster than sugar itself. In contrast, brown rice and parboiled rice fall in the 55–65 range. Grain size and cooking method also matter: larger grains have lower GI, while overcooked mushy rice has very high GI. Please remember that commercial idli and dosa is made up mostly of white rice.

One practical solution is to cook rice and let it rest overnight before consumption. Cooling allows starches to re-crystallize into resistant starch, lowering the GI. Remarkably, reheating the rice does not reverse this effect. Studies—and even experiments within my own family—have shown lower blood glucose (about 20mg) after eating day-old rice compared to freshly cooked.Other foods with similar behavior include potatoes, pasta, and legumes.

For comparison: wheat (45-65), barley (28), bulgur (47), oats (55), quinoa (53), and corn (52) have far lower GI than white rice. The exact GI of these foods depends upon how they are prepared etc..

Practical Guidelines

- **Shift your main meal to midday.** Make lunch your "dinner" and keep supper light.
- **Eat earlier.** Avoid heavy meals late at night to align with circadian rhythms.
- **Watch the waist.** Pay attention not just to weight, but abdominal fat.
- **Choose lower-GI foods.** Prefer parboiled or brown rice over white rice; explore grains like wheat, barley, oats, and bulgur.
- **Consider resistant starch.** Cook rice or potatoes ahead of time, let them cool overnight and consume the next day.

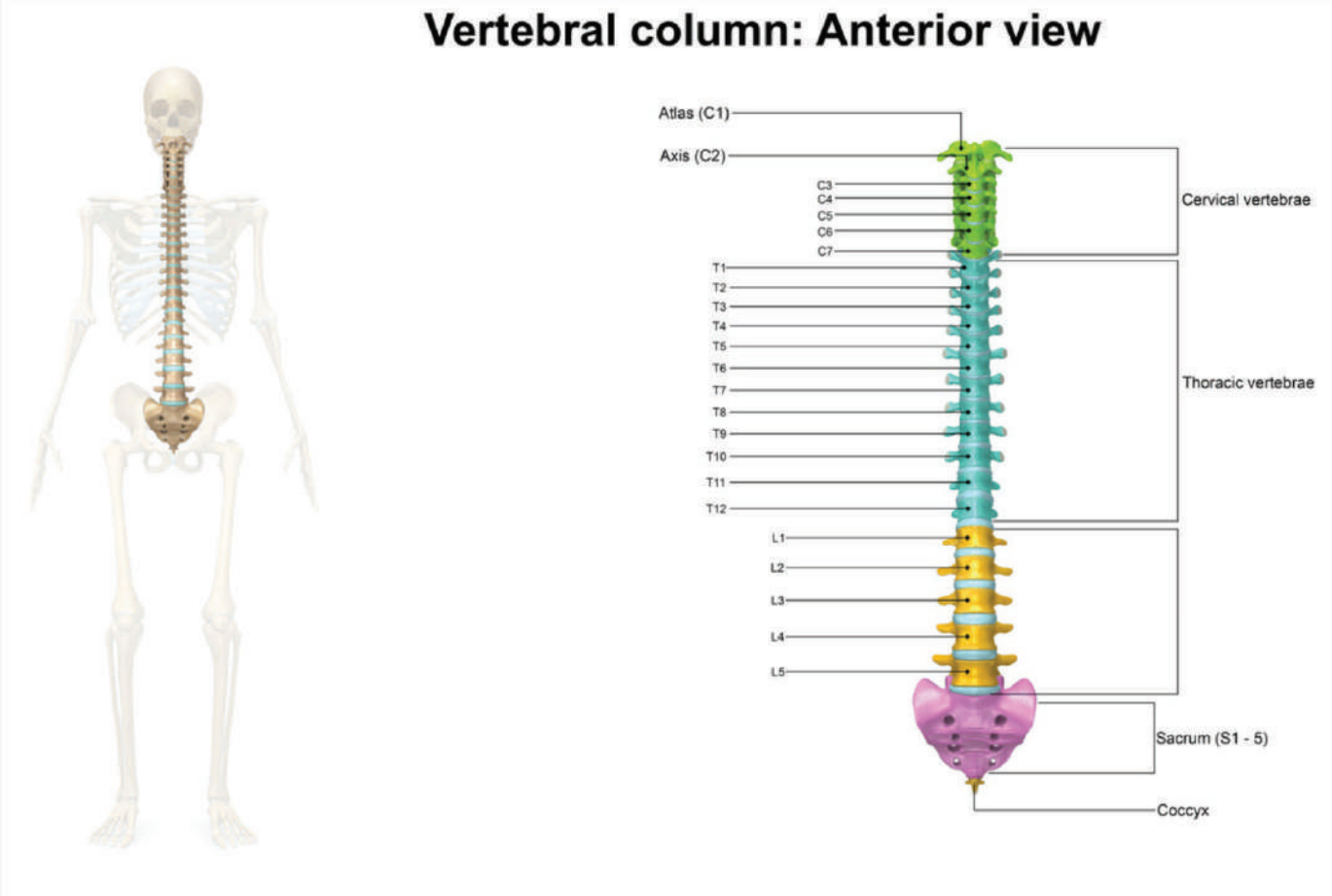
Towards Positive Health

Optimal health lies not in a single diet or fad but in mindful choices. Timing meals, reducing visceral fat, and favoring low-GI foods are small yet powerful shifts. Remember: health is not merely the absence of disease but a harmony of body, mind, and spirit. With thoughtful attention, we can reclaim that balance.

NERD'S CORNER

Dance Anatomy: The Spine as the Central Axis

By Pranamya Suri, MD



The human spine forms the central axis of the body and provides both structural support and functional mobility. It is composed of 33 vertebrae, of which 24 are articulating and 9 are fused. The articulating segments include seven cervical vertebrae in the neck, twelve thoracic vertebrae in the chest, and five lumbar vertebrae in the lower back. The sacrum is formed by the fusion of five sacral vertebrae, while the coccyx, or tailbone, consists of four fused vertebrae. The vertebral bodies gradually increase in size from the cervical to the lumbar region, reflecting the progressively greater loads borne by the lower spine. The spine is the foundation for movement and posture.

In the context of Indian classical dance, the coordinated function of the muscles that are attached to the spine is critical for achieving and sustaining foundational postures such as Natyarambham and Aramandi. Much of our practice as dancers is dedicated to understanding, analyzing, and maintaining the center of gravity in stillness and during movement. The center of gravity in the human body is located approximately two centimeters anterior to the sacrum. The technical aspect of Indian classical dance training is devoted to mastering dynamic control of this center of gravity during complex movement sequences. With that in mind, we can analyze Natyarambham, our foundational postures

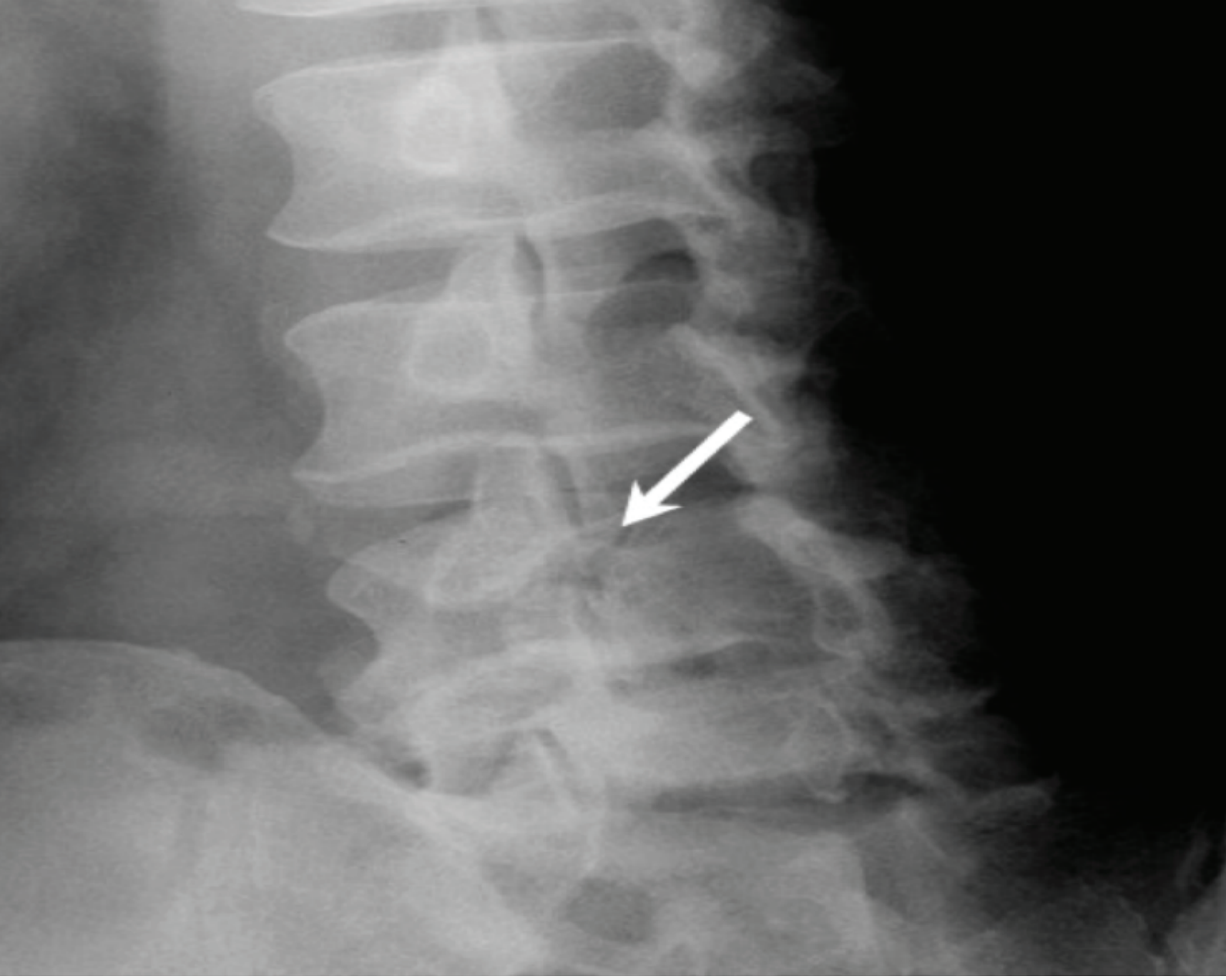
Natyarambham requires the ankle and knees to be bent, the hip to be externally rotated and an erect trunk. At the same time, in the upper body, we attain the perfect alignment of the arms through stabilization of the shoulder girdle. Many muscles are activated during this process. The resulting position establishes a grounded base in the lower extremities while maintaining an expansive and lifted appearance in the upper body. This duality—rooted yet expansive—forms the aesthetic hallmark of the dance form while also posing biomechanical challenges that require conditioning and anatomical awareness.

From a biomechanical perspective, dancers are prone to pelvic and spinal alignment issues. While awareness has improved, understanding the underlying causes is crucial.

- Anterior pelvic tilt is common, linked to weak hip/back extensors and tight hip flexors.
- In Kuchipudi's aramandi, dancers with these issues often compensate by tilting the pelvis forward and exaggerating lumbar lordosis.
- This shifts the center of gravity backward, from the normal anterior location, reducing knee flexion and altering ankle position.
- Over time, these compensations strain the lumbar spine and contribute to chronic low back pain, which is common in dancers as they get older.

Hip structure also plays a role in injuries:

- The iliofemoral (Y) ligament is the body's strongest ligament and stabilizes the hip during extension, abduction, and turnout.
- Extreme turnout, especially with hip instability or femoroacetabular impingement (FAI), can lead to lumbar spine issues



Pars interarticularis fracture, which occurred with a jump and back extension.

In addition to soft tissue injuries, bony injuries represent a critical concern in dancers, particularly those involving the lumbar spine. Pars interarticularis fractures, commonly termed spondylolysis, occur due to repetitive hyperextension and axial loading (jumping with back straight or arched) of the lumbar spine. These stress fractures are especially prevalent among young dancers, whose spines are more vulnerable during periods of skeletal maturation.

In summary, the human spine and its associated structures form the central foundation for posture, alignment, and expressive movement in dance. **Classical dance forms, while aesthetically rooted in tradition, impose unique mechanical demands on the spine, pelvis, and lower extremities. Proper understanding of biomechanics, coupled with conditioning programs aimed at addressing muscle imbalances and preventing overuse, is essential for optimizing performance and minimizing injury risk. A comprehensive approach that integrates anatomical awareness with training adaptations offers dancers the best chance of sustaining long and healthy careers.**

> MilapSpace is Milap's boldest offering yet. It honours the depth and rigour of Indian arts while adapting to the needs of today's learner as a space to belong, grow and discover.
>
> ***Alok Nayak***
> *CEO and Artistic Director, Milap*

Spotlight

MilapSpace: A Global Platform for Indian Arts Learning

MilapSpace is a global online learning platform for Indian arts that makes serious, continuous learning possible from anywhere. It brings together celebrated performers, scholars, and educators to share nuanced knowledge, cultural context, and lived experience that usually remains accessible only in rare, immersive settings.

Courses are curated with a commitment to artistic integrity and strong pedagogy, so learners can deepen understanding, refine practice, and connect more meaningfully with the world of Indian arts. Launched in August 2025 by Milap, MilapSpace is a natural evolution of Milap's mission: to make Indian arts more accessible, continuous, and deeply engaging.

MilapSpace runs on a simple promise: structured, artist-led courses, regular new releases, and live engagements that complement the guru–shishya tradition while widening access to depth. The inaugural faculty features Neyveli Santhanagopalan, Bragha Bessel, Patri Satish Kumar, Rajkumar Bharathi, Lalgudi Vijayalakshmi, Sujata Mohapatra, Anil Srinivasan, Kousic Sen, Rajendra Gangani, Dr Rajeeb Chakraborty, Debapriya Adhikary, Samanwaya Sarkar, Murad Ali Khan, Sikkil Gurucharan, Dr Ranajit Sengupta, Girishh Gopalakrishnan, Sumesh Narayan, and Ramshanker S., with more courses announced every month.

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- Arts enthusiasts and parents who wish to understand traditions, forms, and aesthetics more deeply, even if they are not performers.
- Institutions and community organisations looking to provide credible, accessible learning pathways for their members.

Learners gain unlimited access to all courses, regular live webinars with world-renowned artists, new courses every month, and opportunities for one-to-one mentorship.

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Great art thrives when knowledge is shared openly. With MilapSpace, we're breaking down barriers of geography, hierarchy, and access - and opening up Indian arts to anyone seeking clarity, depth, and meaning. It's designed to support and enrich your journey, helping you understand more deeply, absorb more fully, and experience the arts on a more profound level - whether you're a practitioner or simply someone who wants to connect more closely with this world. And in doing so, we're keeping Indian arts vibrant and relevant for generations to come.

Archana Shastri, *Director MilapSpace*

Reflections

Why the Arts We Cherish are Always About the Teacher

By Anita Vallabh, Ph.D.

When we look back at our school days or our first lessons in the arts, we often think we loved a subject — mathematics, literature, painting, or dance. But if we look closer, what we really loved was the person who brought that subject to life. Our favorite subject has always been about the teacher, and less about the subject itself.

That explains why I loved botany in the eighth grade under a teacher who brought it vividly to life, and why my interest waned after he moved on — while dance nurtured under the loving guidance of Dhananjayan Sir and Shanta akka has remained with me from the age of five to now.

A teacher who is immersed in their art can make even the most complex lesson clear and inviting. Their depth of understanding transforms complexity into simplicity, without ever reducing its richness. Such teachers spark joy, wonder, curiosity, and inspire creativity. In their classrooms and studios, discipline arises naturally from respect and engagement. Silence becomes not an imposed rule, but the result of unwavering attention — a collective state of "flow" where time feels suspended. The opposite is just as true. When knowledge in a teacher is only half-formed, teaching often becomes rigid. Questions are cut short, and "discipline" is enforced to quell curiosity — lest it expose gaps in understanding. Wonder quickly gives way to compliance; joy is replaced by restraint and fear. The subject itself suffers as collateral damage.

This is why we remember teachers more than textbooks, mentors more than syllabi. A math problem, a verse of poetry, a dance sequence, or a brushstroke becomes unforgettable when it is infused with the love of someone who truly lives it. Our favorite subject is never just about formulas, grammar, or technique — it is about the teacher's gentle presence, kind words and devotion to the subject.

In the end, teaching is not only about passing on scholarly information; it is about personifying a way of being. The best teachers in every field are creative artists themselves — still painting, still dancing, still discovering and continuously learning. Their practice is alive, and that aliveness is what inspires students to see beauty in the subject. That is why our favorite subject has always been about the teacher — because through them, we glimpse how knowledge, when deeply lived, becomes a form of wellbeing.

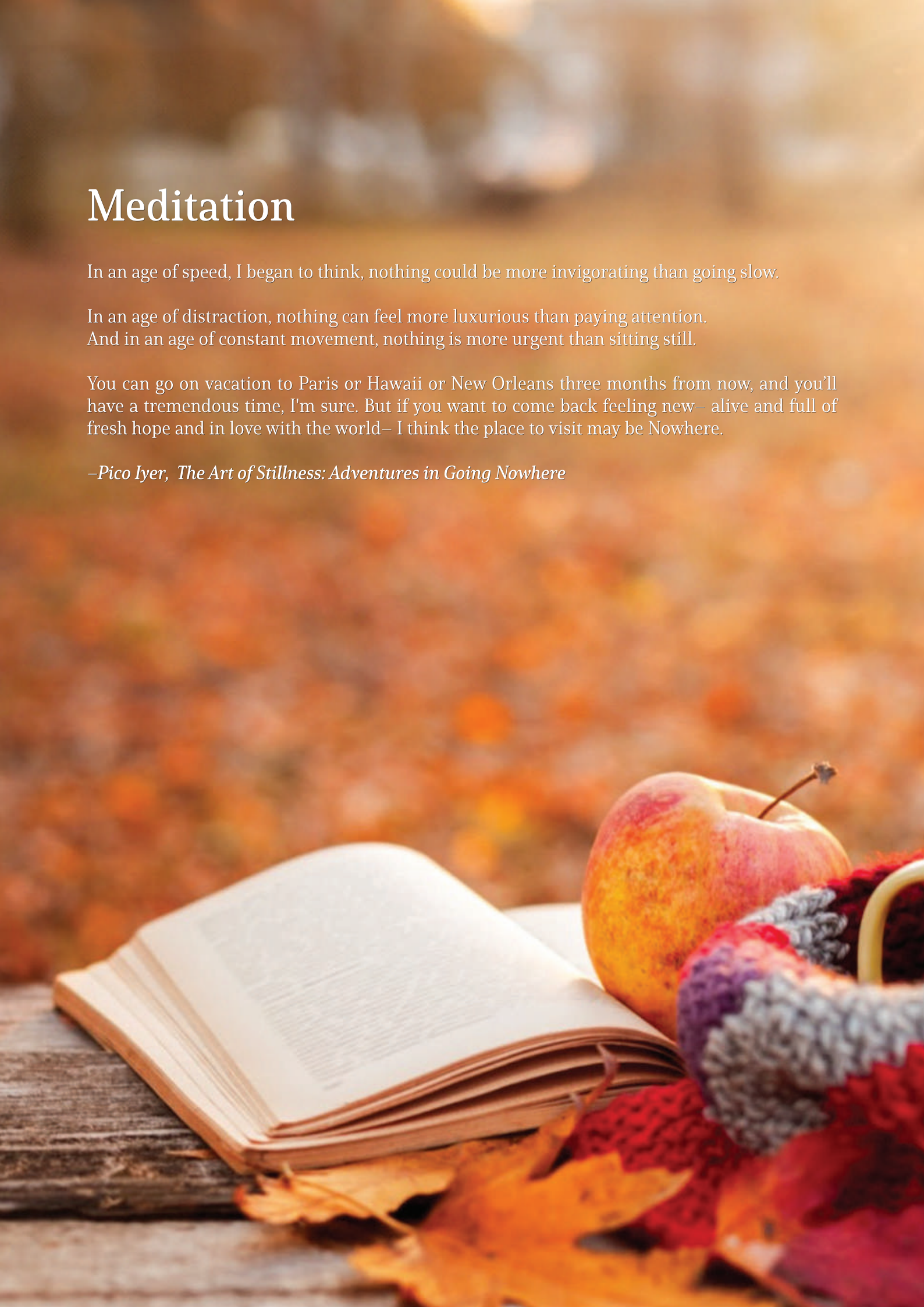
Meditation

In an age of speed, I began to think, nothing could be more invigorating than going slow.

In an age of distraction, nothing can feel more luxurious than paying attention.
And in an age of constant movement, nothing is more urgent than sitting still.

You can go on vacation to Paris or Hawaii or New Orleans three months from now, and you'll have a tremendous time, I'm sure. But if you want to come back feeling new– alive and full of fresh hope and in love with the world– I think the place to visit may be Nowhere.

–Pico Iyer, The Art of Stillness: Adventures in Going Nowhere

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