

A TASTE OF ECSTASY

(Dancing into Trance)

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To speak of ecstasy today, one immediately thinks of party drugs, taking E's, ekkies, pinges, the hug drug, roll, pacman. With properties that consist of both amphetamines and hallucinogenics, this is the love drug, flooding the body with increased serotonin levels, opening the heart and allowing the taker to experience expanded feelings of love. Taken at dance or rave parties, participants ride the wave of the beat, orchestrated by the shaman DJ who weaves a collective trance journey that will last till the sun breaches the horizon.

Seeking ecstasy is nothing new and certainly not just the urban landscape of youth. The quest to experience trance or altered states of consciousness belongs to most cultures whether it be through shamanic ritual, dance, drugs, sex, pain, meditation or religious asceticism. The shifting of consciousness into an altered state to seek communion with the divine has been practised for millennia and there are common elements to be found in many cultures. To compare the journey undertaken by an ecstasy fuelled dancer at a rave party to the sun dance ritual of the North American plains Indians who hang from hooks inserted into their chest, might seem incongruous but a closer investigation will find the modern day dancer follows a not dissimilar path.

But first of all, what is ecstasy? What fascination does it hold for the seeker and why has it existed in most cultures throughout history? In general terms ecstasy is experienced through an altered state of consciousness (which can be measured as being different from the waking beta brain wave state) and is characterized by an expanded spiritual awareness, frequently accompanied by visions and an emotional/intuitive euphoric state. Perception of time, space and self may be strongly altered and while the experience may be brief in physical time, it can also last several days or even more.

Dance is one means available to all of us to move into that still place where the mind begins to cease its constant chatter. When we dance we become lost in the rhythm, the beat takes over and our bodies begin to move. We no longer have to think about what we are doing, the energy supports us and we are freed from the limitations of deciding what we have to do next. The mind moves into a meditative state, totally enjoying the bliss and from there trance states can often arise.

Pranic breathing is one method that aids moving into ecstatic trance. Prana is life force energy, chi or ki, and it is the means by which we breathe oxygen into the body to cleanse and purify our whole being. Harnessing breath has been the central key to all ancient wisdom traditions and shamans would use the current of breath to allow spirit to enter their bodies. Rhythmic, repetitive breathing synchronises brain waves and aligns the body with higher consciousness and in turn, becomes a powerful tool for activating states of trance.

The seven main energy centers known as chakras, when activated through breath, act as interface points between the physical, emotional and spiritual bodies. The breath enters in the form of light energy and the chakras act as bridging points, assisting in the process of integrating and interpreting the light in order to clear and cleanse energetic blocks. These blockages are what keep the body locked into old belief systems and outmoded patterns of behavior and long term, can create disease. As we dance, it is through the chakras that we can begin to gain awareness of these patterns of behavior and as we release them, the

opened and activated body becomes a clear channel of light, providing optimum conditions for trance states to occur.

Ecstatic dance can provide powerful and transformative experiences as the cells vibrate at accelerated rates. The dancer moves into a state of 'no-mind' where they become one with universal consciousness and the body, mind, heart and soul all move into alignment. In this meditative place, deep healing can occur, as the ego drops away and the present moment is experienced.

So what do trance dancers and the North American Plains Indians have in common? Well the ritual sun dance was performed by young men in the tribe as an act of devotion and bravery. They would dance for hours and hours on end, without water and in the hot sun, moving in and out from a central pole, to the never ending rhythm of the shaman's drum. As they danced themselves into states of ecstasy, the trance allowed them to feel no pain and it was then that hooks were inserted into the flesh of the chest and they were raised up by ropes to hang from the pole until by their weight alone, the flesh was ripped through and they fell to the ground. They were said to experience contact with their tribal gods in an ecstatic state of bliss, receiving visions and bringing blessings to the whole of the tribe.

While undergoing extreme feats of endurance is not the aim of the trance dancer today, the techniques employed are not dissimilar. Dancing ecstatically requires you to surrender, to be willing to let go of control and allow the breath and the rhythm to move through you, to dance you, and to carry you into an altered state. It is from this transformational place of 'no-mind' that ecstasy can occur, and while many will pop a pill to gain a similar experience, the natural state is a safe way to access profound and deep healing as the dancer moves into trance, accessing euphoric states and opening the heart to love.

