

# A DANCE CALLED YOGA: THE ANGAHARA

Interview with Natasha Nandini: yogini, Indian dancer & composer of Indian devotional music

Natasha is in conversation with Al Ryan. Al is a writer and has been practising yoga for 25 years.

*Al:*

*You practise a dance, Indian in origin, which you explain comes under the umbrella of yoga. Around the world, we're used to seeing and practising a kind of 'linear', physical yoga with its standing postures, sun salutations, head balances and shoulder stands, etc., known generically as Hatha yoga.*

***The Angahara** is an Indian dance with a flowing, spiral style, intricate steps and a series of subtle hand and feet movements. It's very different, at first glance, from the more familiar styles we're used to. What are the aspects which make this dance yoga?*

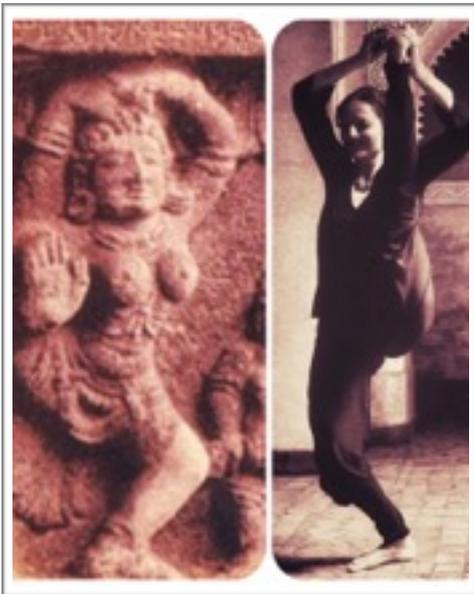
Natasha:

In Indian culture there is a comprehensive term known as Sangeet. It covers vocal music, instrumental music and dance. Sangeet has two categories: one is for performance and mass appreciation. The other path is known as Marg.

The second category is practised alone (although the learning process can take place in a group). These art forms act as guides and pathways to the soul, develop deeper awareness and ultimately lead to union with our true nature. They have that in common with yoga.

*Al:*

*The dance is called **The Angahara**. What does that mean?*



Natasha practising The Angahara and a close-up of one of the 108 sculptures at The Chidambaram Temple in Tamil Nadu, India.

Natasha:

Angahara is a term used in the Indian dance tradition. It describes a karana (simultaneous gesture) in action. I have translated it as, 'charmingly wearing the limbs of the body as a garland'. That description evoked the poetry of the dance so perfectly I decided it would be a fitting name for the practise.

*Al:*

*Is **The Angahara** a progression on from Hatha yoga?*

Natasha:

To be able to attempt **The Angahara** there has to be some yoga in the body - enough to have cleared a lot of blockages and stiffness. These are obstructions we all have - from over or under-exercise, from trauma, injury, and from life itself! Once they start to clear there is more space to evolve. The yogi needs to have enough experience in their Hatha yoga practise to have built up the ability to pay close attention. Ideally they are used in conjunction with each other. One helps feed the other.

*Al:*

So, *The Angahara's* relation to yoga corresponds to the level of attention and consciousness an experienced yogi brings to their practise?

Natasha:

That's an important part of it, yes. When students first begin to practise yoga, often they only have enough awareness to simply make the shapes of the postures. A more experienced student becomes able to create the shape internally, e.g. in the placement of the bones. This in turn sets up the system for something else to make the shape, e.g. the movement of the winds (vayus) from the subtle body.

Practise only becomes yoga when the yogi has no agenda (i.e. no attachment to a specific outcome). When they are able to work at their art with complete devotion the yamas and niyamas [yoga's ethical guidelines] will be incorporated spontaneously, rather than unnaturally forced.



Carvings of karanas on the Chidumbaram temple in Tamil Nadu, India.

Al:

*What are the origins of **The Angahara**?*

Natasha:

It is to be found in The Natya Shastra, an ancient Sanskrit text. It dates from the Vedic period. In my research I made use of Hindi commentaries on the Sanskrit text so that I could get a closer translation of the original work. Many Hindi words have the same Sanskrit roots.

English is my mother tongue and I speak and write Hindi. I learned Hindi specifically so that I could talk to Indian musicians and artists in their own language. I have had the great good fortune to be granted intimate access to these ancient works and to learn directly from these Indian masters.

*Al:*

*So being bilingual and having a scholarly approach has enabled you to translate it for Western audiences to appreciate and learn from?*

Natasha:

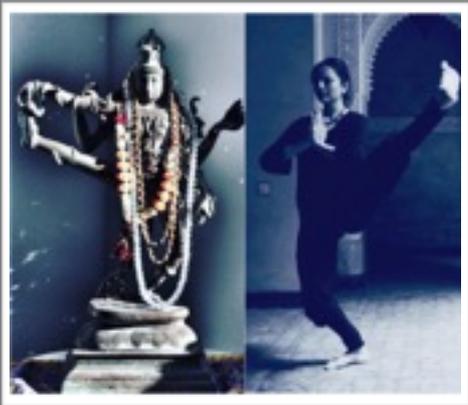
I hope it helps anyone who is interested.

In addition to the texts, there is also a collection of sculptures of the 108 movements in **The Angahara** chiselled into the Chidambaram temple in Tamil Nadu.

*Al:*

*What is the significance of these 108 key transitions or Karanas?*

Natasha:

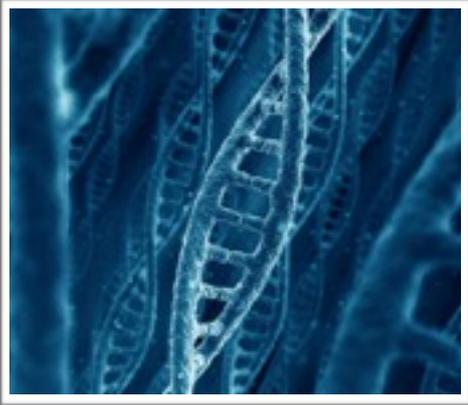


Karanas means the simultaneous gestures of the arms and legs: the literal translation is ‘action’. Strung together, like the garland, karanas in motion make up an angahara. They relate to different aspects of the universe. Symbolically, they express Shiva’s actions he performs - creation, preservation, destruction, concealment and grace.

In Hindu cosmology Shiva is the embodiment of all movement or energy in the universe. **The Angahara** takes the macro (universal) directly to the core of the micro (the individual). The idea is that the individual can harness their steadiness, attention and skill to harmonise with an infinitely larger consciousness or awareness.

*Al:*

*That’s a wonderful aspiration. In what practical and concrete ways can practising **The Angahara** achieve this ideal for us mere mortals?*



A close-up of the DNA double helix consisting of two spiral chains of deoxyribonucleic acid.

Natasha:

In my experience it really helps free up emotional obstructions. Once the physical obstacles in the body start to break down it creates more space in the yogi's awareness. Blockages buried deep in the subconscious begin to come to the surface. The practise aids their release. The circular, spiral movements of **The Angahara** work on a deeper and more subtle level than anything I have previously encountered in twenty years of practise.

*Al:*

*And the spiral relates back to that most fundamental aspect of life itself, our DNA, which holds the blueprint for how living organisms are built. The two spiral strands that contain our genetic information are known as the double helix. So a spiral movement towards growth and becoming emulates that process in yoga of aligning more and more closely with our true nature?*

Natasha:

Yes, spirals are everywhere in our world - even the planets in our galaxy orbit around each other. Also, if you watch plants grow in a time-lapse sequence they don't just grow straight up in a linear fashion, they spiral upwards.

In the musical discipline of dhrupad teaching focusses on emulating the spiral movements of nature with sound.

All I know from my own experience is that when I began practising these spiral movements with the rapt attention they require, my perception shifted. It moved from a 2D awareness to being much more three-dimensional. It was the same story as Hatha yoga yet subtler, more immediate and incredibly vivid.

*Al:*

*Indian devotional music is a cornerstone of your life - what is it's connection to yoga and **The Angahara**?*



Natasha:

In India it has always been understood that sound penetrates matter on a subtle level. So, if you use the voice in the same way as **The Angahara** and yoga practise, in harmony with nature, it helps to purify your system. You would use the same levels of attention and intention in each practise. It is the subtle nature of sound that is believed to be the bridge that connects our manifest, material world to the source of all creation (or the unmanifest).

*Al:*

*You perform it with such skill and grace. Do you think that people will believe they can achieve this too?*

Natasha:

As with any form of yoga it's never just about belief - it's always about practise! **The Angahara**, of course, takes time to learn and refine, but it can be broken down into manageable steps. It then becomes an intimate relationship where you meet your own self through the practise. It's at this juncture where it really starts to bear fruit and the practitioner begins to evolve.

*Al:*

*Yes, it's easy to forget that when, for example, Americans and Europeans first saw pictures and old black and white newsreels of Indian practitioners able to bend themselves into yoga postures it looked incredibly exotic to them, if not an impossible feat. Yet now, sixty or seventy years later, Hatha yoga is a commonplace activity in the West. There are around 40 million people, and rising, practising yoga in the US alone. Even just 20 or 30 years ago that number was more like a tiny handful.*

Natasha:

**The Angahara** perhaps looks a little unfamiliar to most twenty-first century yoga practitioners. It is one strand in the series of ancient arts originating in India, which are being re-discovered by new generations of seekers. My hope is when it's practised with both integrity and devotion, it will have a profound and nourishing effect, lighting the path to freedom.

## Find Natasha Nandini at:

Natasha made a film of The Angahara called 'Into The Light' here:

<http://bit.ly/2C7QymG>

Other places to find Natasha...

Website:

<http://bit.ly/2pvZXPh>

YouTube Channel:

<http://bit.ly/2BcBuGL>

Facebook:

<http://bit.ly/2Fy7pna>

Instagram:

<http://bit.ly/2BEUqyo>