

A Magazine on Philosophy, Culture & Volunteering

THE ACROPOLITAN

JUL
AUG
SEP
2020



NA
NEW ACROPOLIS

FEATURE

Fortitude in the Face of Difficulties

Artiste Extraordinaire:
Ramaa Bharadvaj

Stepping Back into
The World of Heroes

FROM THE EDITORIAL DESK

Dear Reader,

As if a paradox, the unprecedented scope and duration of isolation these past few months has also shed light on the unity of our collective destiny, and our inner strength. Despite the challenges, we've encountered countless examples of everyday heroes, fortified with a sense of gratitude and responsibility, and the courage to Be, revealing the best of our human potential.

The ancient adage reminds us always that "This too shall pass." But as we start to find our new 'normal', what learning might we extract from this experience? What mark will it have left within the deep chambers of our hearts? Perhaps we discovered the things that really matter to us, beyond the daily race. And perhaps we might have awoken, once again to the essence of tradition, steeped in the aspiration for Beauty and Harmony, within us and without.


Let us dare to Discover our own inner world once again. Let us Awaken the force within, and really Transform to the best versions of ourselves, to alter the course that history might take.

Harianto H Mehta,
Editor




CONTENTS

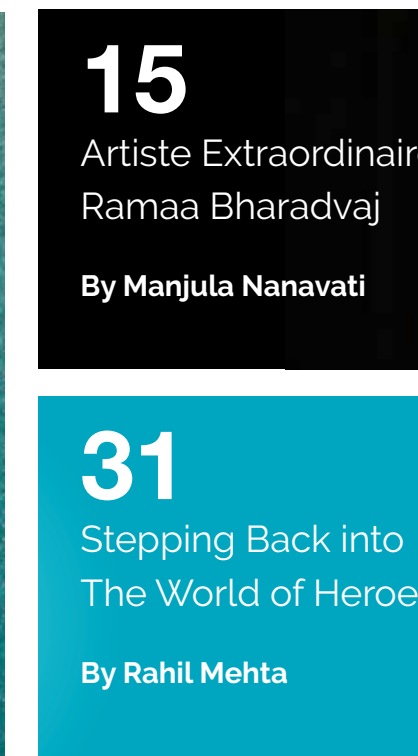
03
Fortitude in the Face of Difficulties
By Delia Steinberg Guzmán



11
Give me Strength & Gratitude!
By Akanksha Sanghi



27
Dare to live in Harmony
By Shraddha Shetty



15
Artiste Extraordinaire:
Ramaa Bharadvaj
By Manjula Nanavati



Image Courtesy: Trinadh Rakesh

31
Stepping Back into
The World of Heroes
By Rahil Mehta



Image Courtesy: rudaliso/shutterstock.com

07
Is Being the Highest Giving?
By Sukesh Motwani



FORTITUDE IN THE FACE OF DIFFICULTIES

By Delia Steinberg Guzmán
*Honorary President of International
Organization New Acropolis*

When 2020 began, we did not yet know the extent of the difficult times we would have to face. A short time later came the spread of a pandemic, which affected most – if not all – countries in the world, showing that in such cases what we regard as differences do not exist. We are all human beings, we are all vulnerable to sickness and we are all affected by pain.

Every day we see with surprise and panic the number of people affected by the coronavirus, the growing number of deaths, and even if fortunately many recover, the number of those who have lost their lives is breath-taking. It is so great that sometimes we see no more than figures and we forget the pain of those who leave this world in the loneliness of a hospital or in worse places, or in the sadness of those who cannot approach or say goodbye to their loved ones.

We do not see, however much it is repeated, the tireless dedication of those who are sparing no efforts to save lives, to raise the spirits of those who feel unprotected. They are true models of Fortitude.

Evidently, these are difficult times, and above all, special times which put our inner values to the test.

To know how to suffer is not easy, but if there is fortitude, suffering becomes an enormous power which we were not aware of and we did not know we could develop. There are forms of suffering which ennoble, and we have only to think of the great number of wonderful works of art that have been born under the influence of pain. However, they are expressions of pain that transport us to elevated spheres of consciousness, producing, more than consolation, a sense of infinity which allows us to merge with the whole universe.



We should have contact every day with the beauty that restores our dignity and makes us feel greater and better.

Behind pain there is a meaning, and although when we are trapped by pain we do not understand the meaning of life, we should make an effort to reach those causes that are deeper than those which are simply evident. This deeper understanding would help us to discover other causes, other answers which are not so evident, but no less true for that.

I know it is easy to use words to explain, words to console, words... However, in the absence of another more intimate and subtle means of communication, we have no other option than to use words. If we were to remember some ancient teachings, those which time has swallowed up in favour of more superficial and insignificant forms, we would recover the hidden meaning that lies concealed behind words. Each of them contains a concept, an idea. And the sound of that word should be enough for its inner meaning to return to us.

To know how to suffer is not easy, but if there is fortitude, suffering becomes an enormous power which we were not aware of and we did not know we could develop.

We recommend "fortitude" and we don't know exactly what we mean by it. Is it to put up with pain without anyone noticing? Is it to hide our tears? Is it to show coldness when we are burning inside? Is it to fall into apathy and lack of feelings? Is it to resort to aggression to give vent to what we cannot show?

Unfortunately, those forms of apparent fortitude have a short duration and sooner or later are lost, giving rise to much coarser or more inappropriate expressions of the human being. Then, we mistrust fortitude and any other moral value which may be similar to it.

While we are waiting for words to acquire a special meaning, we believe that fortitude is a kind of strength, naturally, but needs other elements to complete it and turn it into a living value.


True fortitude needs will, which means a permanent value founded on our principles and in what we want to do in life. It is a type of courage that is not destroyed in the face of adversities, but, on the contrary, grows and becomes more powerful and refined. It is the capacity for decision and for taking responsibility for one's mistakes in order to return to life again and again with a renewed desire to improve oneself.

The strongest person is the one who understands most and loves most, who understands others and loves himself by giving himself opportunities.

True fortitude needs intelligence, not reasoning. Intelligence searches for the reasons behind things, it is capable of seeing behind the appearances and of grasping immediately, in a flash, what is hidden behind each situation, behind each person, behind oneself.

True fortitude needs love. Far from this virtue is hardness of character, coldness and ill-treatment. On the contrary, the strongest person is the one who understands most and loves most, who understands others and loves himself by giving himself opportunities, far from pride and vanity.

True fortitude needs union. Alone we can do many things, but united in heart with those with whom we share our lives, we can almost make miracles. Union gives strength which multiplies our own by millions, it multiplies will, intelligence and love.

Fortitude and Union are unique medicines in difficult and special times. 

IS BEING THE HIGHEST GIVING?

By Sukesh Motwani





Deeply inspired by great philanthropists in our times, one often struggles with the dilemma of how and what we can do in terms of charity or social service. Generally, such noble intentions first veer towards sending supplies and relief material to victims of natural disasters, accidents or riots. One might also perhaps commit a part of earnings regularly towards charity (as is instituted as part of many religious traditions) or one could offer skills to benefit others, like a few of my friends who teach English to their housemaids' children. I respect these initiatives immensely, and I too have many times, done my bit for the household or office help, or contributed reading materials and other resources for underprivileged children. I am especially inspired by the many tales of successful corporations who contribute via CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) activities. But I have often felt disappointment that as a mid-level entrepreneur, I do not have the resources to do more. Whilst discussing this aspiration, a teacher-figure in my life asked me, "What part of *you* experiences joy after an act of philanthropy? Is that joy more complete because of the number of people benefitted by of you? Is philanthropy only about constantly distributing resources to the needy? Instead, can philanthropy be about offering what you **are**, rather than what you **have**?"

I suddenly felt that this entire concept of comparing my acts of kindness with more resourceful and bigger philanthropists, was needless and superficial. I realised after some investigation that Kindness as a virtue and act, is not limited by, nor does it expand with the number of people affected by it. Hence, it has less to do with the quantity of resources distributed or variety of actions committed; instead it is related to the quality of the virtue; its strength and its unconditional uncalculated dissemination. And so it demanded a shift inside oneself.

Also, I was beginning to see that there were two kinds of 'joy' anticipated with any act of philanthropy. The joy of unconditional giving, with absolutely no expectations, and another joy that is a sense of 'feel good', driven by the ego, which serves as a superficial assurance of self-image because '*charity appears cool and makes one feel good about oneself and acknowledged by others*'.

Serendipitously, I discovered a piece of poetry to help me explore the difference between '*what I am*' and '*what I have*'.

This emotion of fear, like any aversion, is itself a message for us to look deeper within.

It invites us to face the challenge at hand fully, as an opportunity to prioritize what it is needed, rather than what one would like to do because of convenience or comfort.



Clearing, by Martha Postlewaite
*Do not try to save
 the whole world
 or do anything grandiose
 Instead, create
 a clearing
 in the dense forest
 of your life
 and wait there
 patiently,
 until the song
 that is your life
 falls into your own cupped hands
 and you recognize and greet it.
 Only then will you know
 how to give yourself
 to this world so worthy of rescue.*



This catalysed within me, a deep investigation of what it means to 'be' rather than 'have'. I realised that over the years of my volunteering activities at New Acropolis, whenever I superficially efforted to help, the lack of heart and love, often tainted my actions, especially when I was overwhelmed with fear, when the assigned task was unsuited or uncomfortable to my personality. When I am able to 'glimpse' this tendency, I perceive a distorted sense of my own capacity, and of others in my environment. This emotion of fear, like any aversion, is itself a message for us to look deeper within. It invites us to face the challenge at hand fully, as an opportunity to prioritize what is needed, rather than what one would like to do because of convenience or comfort.

I realized that I am wider and bigger than my fears and aversions; that I am a part of a beehive and that whatever is good for the beehive, is good for the bee. My ability to give, lay beyond the lies of my subjective opinions, fears, and comforts. Pushing

beyond this, required courage, altruism and confidence and hence, this effort captures the true meaning of volunteering, and in it perhaps lies the essence of philanthropy.


"The greatest gift that you have to give is that of your own self-transformation." – Lao Tzu

I also ask myself frequently whether I am being able to listen deeply, to appreciate and be truthful in an assertive and just manner, both in the receiving and giving aspects of any social interaction. During the corona lockdown phase, when this piece is being written, all of us are witnessing an overwhelming sense of uncertainty and fear, and I realise how crucial it is to be more considerate and careful about one's state of mind when both at home and on video calls, as tempers and emotions are frayed and often volatile.

Of course this investigation of my emotional triggers and fragility is a lifelong one, and I can't claim to be have suddenly changed into a serene being overnight. But this investigation is gently allowing me to understand how deeply altruism is connected with mindfulness of one's own inner state of being.

According to revered Buddhist teacher Kyabgon Phakchok Rinpoche, "The best friend in your life, the best teacher, the best gift you can give yourself or anyone else, is a mind that has the pillar of mindfulness. The mindfulness that knows what it's thinking, that knows what it's saying, and knows what it's doing. The way to accomplish this, is diligent daily practice my friends."





So my investigation allows me to state with conviction that we may have very little, or lots, in terms of money and gifts to help with, but our true generosity emerges from who we really *are*, rather than what we *have*.


If we can dare to exercise these human values then life is no longer just about distributing resources, which is admirable by itself. But there is no limit to offering goodness and exercising a mindful response, especially in times of crisis. This serves as a means to share the best version of ourselves; we can spread hope by actualizing our inner potentials. Is there a greater gift one can give to the world? Perhaps it will express as becoming a better friend, neighbour, co-worker and family member.

The wise Confucius suggested that a human being's internal harmony is essential for harmony within our community, within our nation and finally between all the nations of the world. I had read this many years back, but suddenly I glimpse the depth and truth that lies in it. To be able to embed and live the values of truth, goodness, beauty and justice in our words, thoughts and actions, practically paves the way for a better society and a better world. This effort may sound lofty, because to fight one's ego is a tough battle. And yet in these times of crisis, this is perhaps the real need of the hour.

Interestingly, the same solution is offered by contemporary thinkers like Matthieu Ricard and eminent writer Yuval Noah Harari, who agree that all the keys for the survival of the human race, out of the biggest crises, be it the pandemic, the ecological crisis, the potential nuclear flashpoint, or the

implications of 'digital dictatorships', are only going to emerge from the harmony, global solidarity and cooperation at all levels of humanity. This can only come from the *individual keys of love and altruism within the hearts of each one of us*.

To be able to embed and live the values of truth, goodness, beauty and justice in our words, thoughts and actions, practically paves the way for a better society and a better world.



I have gotten some answers to what my mentor had posed to me. The joy of giving by 'being', had everything to do with a higher eternal part within me, and not dependent on the number of people being helped or the volume of resources I had access to.

As the great Albert Einstein concurred, "Every good thought, every good word, every good emotion, and every act of kindness, is lifting the vibration of your being to new heights. And as you begin to raise your vibration, a new life and a new world will reveal itself to you." ☯☯



GIVE ME STRENGTH & GRATITUDE!

By Akanksha Sanghi

Gratitude is independent of receiving something. It is a state of being, an attitude towards life which revealed the ability to see the good in each thing; the ability to be thankful even for challenges and difficulties.

As I began to reflect on how our way of living had changed literally overnight when the lockdown was announced in Mumbai, I realised that like most people, I went through various stages of emotions, doubts, and concerns. There were moments of uncertainty, and confusion about the future, the health of loved ones, the suffering around the planet, and concern about the outlook of our family business, our employees... However, early on I was able to distance myself from this constant noise; the diverse opinions and criticism about how the situation should be handled, the influx of information, the endless WhatsApp forwards, and the general sense of panic that I noticed around me.

I began to wonder if this distance was an expression of denial, or if I had become apathetic to what was going on. Why was I not affected like the many around me? Where was the panic? What was my stand amidst the opinions and questions on what was going to happen to the economy?

But deeply honest with myself, I realized that actually I wasn't apathetic or in denial at all. My attention instead was focussed on the things on which I actually had some control, rather than on all the circumstances that were completely out of my hands. I realised that debating various opinions of what should be done was futile because

anyway it was not my decision to make. Instead, I tried to shift my focus on how to prepare for the future, externally as well as internally. For instance, I busied myself with working on a practical roadmap despite the uncertainties for our business and investments. I also took the opportunity to finish pending tasks and learned some new skills like baking. Perhaps most importantly, I took the time to enjoy the simplest pleasures such as the chirping of the birds, the sound of the waves, and beautiful clear skies – rare in our city of Mumbai. And my classes of philosophy kept me gainfully engaged, always reminding me to work on myself, helping me to remain centred.

I attribute this approach and attitude to one underlying sentiment that was predominant consistently throughout

the period of the lockdown: GRATITUDE. I started thinking about what Gratitude really means...

Despite the confusion externally, I felt thankful that my loved ones and I were safe, thankful for the availability of essential supplies, thankful that I was able to be productive, and enjoy this time in our home, while many across the globe didn't have a home to confine themselves to. But, is Gratitude only to be thankful for what we have or receive? On deeper reflection, I began to see that Gratitude is INDEPENDENT of receiving something. It is a state of being, an attitude towards life which revealed the ability to see the GOOD in each thing; the ability to be thankful even for challenges and difficulties, for it is through them that I might meet strength, new abilities and my own unknown potential.

Instead of being consumed by the negativity and criticism, I was inspired to seek out the GOOD. There were medical workers, security forces, policemen and so many others who had put their lives at risk to safeguard our own. Many individuals were facilitating the supply of essential goods and services, like milkmen, delivery boys, pharmacies and vegetable vendors, ensuring that we had enough food, medical supplies and other essentials. There were many NGOs who had reached out to help those on the streets in large numbers. I observed that neighbours started to reach out to one other, connected more, in order to help each other. Those living alone, and the elderly, were looked after by those less at risk. Friends and family who had not connected for years, reached out to check on one another, offering support or just a listening ear. In each case, I observed the spirit of service, of fulfilling one's human duty, sometimes even at the risk of one's own health and life.

Perhaps from this we can observe that the potential of GOODNESS is deeply embedded in our human nature. Virtues such as empathy, the sentiment of service, kindness and generosity, all lie latent within us. It made me wonder why it takes a crisis of this magnitude for us to bring forth this better part of ourselves, if it already exists as our underlying nature. Why do we not express this nature more,

Life is Just; even if it is not always clear at first. We always get what we NEED; sometimes as a favourable circumstance, sometimes as a challenge or a difficult period, and sometimes in the form of a crisis.

in the course of our daily lives? Nevertheless, I was thankful that the pandemic had revealed this truth, this goodness that characterises our human capacity.

With the sentiment of Gratitude, I was able to look at things more deeply, beyond the tangible, to investigate the purpose behind the smallest of things, to search for their essence – for it is in the essence that we may discover the Good! Like many, I asked: Why, despite all the technological and medical advancements that we have today, had something as seemingly small as a virus taken the whole world by surprise, forcing our lives to come to a standstill. This reflection clarified for me that ultimately, Life is Just; even if it is not always clear at first. We always get what we NEED; sometimes as a favourable circumstance, sometimes as a challenge or a difficult period, and sometimes in the form of a crisis like this. Each can be dealt with as a victim or with the spirit of adventure to learn something new and grow – the choice is ours.

I began to see more clearly that perhaps there is a deep connection, a meaning behind everything that happens to us, individually and collectively. Could the pandemic be nature's invitation for us to pause and reassess the paths we have chosen? Perhaps it is an invitation to re-consider with humility our approach towards life, towards each other, and towards the planet.

And so, through Gratitude, I found STRENGTH; perhaps they are two sides of the same coin. We need strength to be able to see goodness and justice in every circumstance, to look beyond the surface. With strength, comes the ability to see that however unfavourable a circumstance may seem, it is perhaps something we need, an opportunity to learn and grow. It is strength which allows us to remain centred without giving in to panic, to build inner conviction that while we have no control over the circumstances that are dealt to us, we can always choose how we respond to them, and not allow them to consume us.

I wonder, as things start normalising post-lockdown, will we forget our learning and reflections from this period? Or perhaps with an inner state of Gratitude, might we delve into our inner Strength to actualize small changes that we have realised are necessary; to always strive to act from the better aspects of ourselves, illuminating the best of our human potential? ☯☯

ARTISTE EXTRAORDINAIRE: RAMAA BHARADVAJ

By Manjula Nanavati



Ramaa Bharadvaj is a celebrated dancer, choreographer, storyteller, educator, writer and arts-curator. She has lived and worked in the US for 32 years, where she was the recipient of numerous prestigious awards for choreography, as well as for her exemplary contribution to the Arts in California. She has served on the boards of both state and national arts agencies and has been a visiting faculty member of various reputed universities, while her essays and cultural commentaries have been published by leading publications.

Having returned to India in 2009, she currently lives in Bengaluru where she teaches, writes and speaks on the arts, with an emphasis on dance. She curates the annual national dance and music festival at Chinmaya Naada Bindu Gurukula in Pune.

As a dancer Ramaa ji displays remarkable confidence, precision, and fluidity, combined with an extraordinary spectrum of nuanced emotion. As a story teller she essays multiple roles with the ease and skill that comes only with a mastery of the craft. As a choreographer she seamlessly blends the geography of space, the geometry of form and the syntax of music. And as a writer and lecturer Ramaa ji is articulate and knowledgeable, punctuating her scholarship with experience and humour.

Despite her busy calendar Ramaa ji enthusiastically shared her insight through an interview with The Acropolitan Magazine.

THE ACROPOLITAN: The 1st chapter of the *Natyashastra* gives us a fascinating origin story of the Theatre Arts, of which dance is one. Can you recount that for our readers?

RAMAA BHARADVAJ: This origin story about the ancestry of India's theatre-arts is rooted in the Indian psyche which dedicates all to a Divine Source. It is quite an intriguing tale that speaks of changing times; of creativity and collaborations; and most importantly of humility and grace.

The story is set in the *Treta Yuga*, and it begins when 45 distinguished sages (including Vyasa, Valmiki, Visvamitra, Bharadvaja, Vasishtha, Agastya, Durvasa and Narada) pose questions to sage Bharatamuni who had become the custodian of a new 5th *Veda* created by Brahma - the Creator. In fact, the entire text follows the format of questions and answers, with sage Bharatamuni recounting why this 5th *Veda* was created, and detailing its contents and purposefulness for the people of the Earth.



Image Courtesy: Bala Bharadvaj

The story starts as if in a flashback when the Guardians of the world are troubled by a moral decline among humans. They see that the wisdom of the already existing 4 *Vedas* was too esoteric to be even understood by the common man, let alone be applied in life. So, they approach Brahma to ask for a new body of knowledge that is not only both visible and audible, but also accessible to all. Brahma distills the core values of the 4 *Vedas* (poetry from *Rg*, music from *Sama*, communicative means from *Yajur*, and aesthetics from *Atharva*) and creates *Natya Veda* (wisdom of theatre-arts) as a timeless science for all.

.....

The purpose of good theatre is not to play safe, but to continue to live and to provoke.

.....

So extensive are the contents of this new scripture, that it is decided that only sages who are capable of intense discipline can be its proper custodians. Thus, sage Bharatamuni is chosen to receive this knowledge and pass it on through his 105 disciples/sons. Bharatamuni puts this 5th *Veda* immediately to use by creating the first theatrical production for the prestigious Flagstaff Festival honoring Indra. The theme, as in any successful play, involves heroes (*Devas*) and villains (*Asuras*) and the victory of the former.

Here there is a twist in the story. One would expect that a production created with the cooperation of celestials would have had a smooth run. But not so! As the play begins, the *Asuras* object at being shown negatively and create havoc by freezing the actors.

Indra, enraged at this sabotage, wields his flagstaff and defeats the *Asuras*. So, this first play has a sloppy and chaotic ending. But, Visvakarma the celestial architect is then summoned to build a proper theatre to keep away disruptive gate-crashers.

Bharatamuni then embarks on a new production, even better than the first one, this time with Siva and Brahma as his collaborators – Brahma providing the storyline, and Siva and Parvati introducing dance into this new play.

Scene shifts! Bharatamuni and his sons have now descended to Earth. It is here that the scholar-sages surround him, eager to hear directly from him about this 5th *Veda* that would benefit mankind. Bharatamuni's answers to their questions become the *Natyashastra* - the comprehensive manual on the science of Indian dramaturgy.



Ramaa Bharadvaj at a South Indian temple

I remember reading an interesting viewpoint on this origin story, by the renowned actor-director Girish Karnad. According to him, this myth points out that however carefully devised, live theatre carries the risk of failure and that the purpose of good theatre is not to play safe, but to continue to live and to provoke.

TA: Why are the arts so important? What is its purpose and what can it teach us?

RAMAA JI: I doubt if anyone can expand on the purpose of the arts, more than what the *Natyashastra* has already defined. Even while contemplating the creation of a new instructive tool, Brahma decides to combine wisdom from various sources – *Vedas*, epics, mythology, science, arts, and crafts. This new medium of instruction was to be a source of advice to humans in matters of worldly life namely, duty, wealth, and fame.

Later in the text, through a soliloquy Brahma further explains the purpose of Theatre-Arts; that they are meant to

- represent the activities of the three worlds,
- mimic all types of humans (good, bad, indifferent), all types of emotions, and all types of exploits of both the gods and *Asuras*, kings, and commoners.
- to be a model of all the sciences (*shastras*)
- incorporate goals of life relating to the righteous (*dharma*), secular (*artha*), sensual (*kāma*), and spiritual (*mokṣa*)
- portray the good and bad that befalls all

- teach the path of virtue, give courage to the cowards, enlighten those of poor intellect, soothe agitated minds, admonish the ill-natured, encourage self-control, cheer the sorrowful, and
- offer encouragement and sound advice as well as entertainment and pleasure.

.....

Dance and drama are supposed to facilitate the awakening of higher qualities such as goodness, kindness, generosity, forgiveness, devotion, etc., thus creating a positive shift in the behavior of an entire society.

.....

He further declares that there would be no wisdom, no knowledge, no art or craft that cannot be found in the scripture of drama, and that it has been created for the benefit of all and not for exclusively glorifying any particular class or crowd of society.

Such use of the dramatic arts as a mirror to the society for seeing itself has given this inherited divine legacy a purpose beyond mere entertainment. Dance and drama (both live-theatre and film) are supposed to facilitate the awakening of higher qualities such as goodness, kindness, generosity, forgiveness, devotion, etc., thus creating a positive shift in the behavior of an entire society. As an example, when the movie "Babe" about a talking baby pig was

released in the United States, this "drama" invoked feelings of great compassion and non-violence towards animals to such an extent, that the sale of pork dramatically went down for several months.

Throughout history also, there are instances of social change created by dancers and actors through their art form. My favorite one comes from a 16th-century episode. Once, as a group of Kuchipudi performers is traveling to perform in the court of a king, they rest in the village of Siddhavatam. There, they witness the sufferings of the people at the hands of the local chieftain and decide to do something about it. When they reach the king's court, they enact a dramatized version of the chieftain's methods of torture. An inquiry follows and the chieftain is punished.



Image Courtesy: Kshiti Saverna

Other examples of using drama as a tool for dialoguing come from contemporary contexts. In the 1960s, a Brazilian director named Augusto Boal began a new form of theatre known as the Theatre of the Oppressed which has influenced theatre practitioners all over the world, including India. To Boal, Theatre was not a spectacle to be observed, but a collaborative experience of, by, and for the people, in which the spectators themselves become actors, both participating and observing.

In California, where I lived for more than 2 decades, there were organizations that creatively engaged incarcerated youth in conflict resolution while teaching them concepts of tolerance, understanding, and respect, through dance and improvisational theatre. Their themes included traumatic occurrences in these children's lives such as racism, gang violence, drug/alcohol abuse, teen suicide, domestic violence, and war. Where the justice system of society could not reach, theatre and dance easily did.

In fact, when I see the word "Nartan" used as an epithet for dance, I see another definition in it. I see a combination of the words *Nara* (human) + *Tanoti* (expansion) thus signifying its purpose as that which allows for an expansive experience through a comprehensive portrayal and understanding of humanity in all its varied aspects.

TA: Is Art primarily for self-expression and self-discovery or a more universal and unifying experience?

RAMAA JI: In order to answer this question, it is necessary that we first understand that from the Indian context, the primary purpose of all Art is to invoke *Rasa*. And this

Rasa or aesthetic essence was itself called *Brahmananda Sahodara* (the twin brother of spiritual bliss). This implies that Art is capable of bestowing a mystic experience of realizing the Divine Truth. In this process, the priority of an Indian artist is more ennobling than just self-expression, because Art has always been about experiencing a Universal Being within oneself. But the audience member was not excluded from this experience. It was never about the artists having a personal experience irrespective of the audience, but rather the artist becoming a conduit through whose Art the spectators have the experience too.

Hence, the receivers of the Art thus created, were also designated with a special name, "*rasika*" the "experienter", thus elevating them from mere sensory levels of seeing (spectator) or listening (audience) to that of being an intuitive participant. So, the artistic-journey was not just a personal expression or happy entertainment. It was a collaborative pilgrimage between the art-maker and the art-receiver, towards a spiritual encounter.

Here, I recall a lovely phrase that I once heard from renowned dancer VP Dhananjayan that the purpose of Theater-Arts is to educate the illiterate, to enlighten the literate and to entertain the enlightened.

TA: How does Dance speak to an audience differently from the other arts?

RAMAA JI: Rather than say that dance speaks 'differently', I would like to rephrase it, that dance, because of its inherently collaborative nature, speaks 'comprehensively'. Dance is naturally a

multi-dimensional art-form, and it combines poetry and literature, painting and sculpture, nuances of adornment such as clothing and jewelry, along with movement vocabulary, music, and language of a particular global or even regional culture. However, from the Indian perspective, this sort of interrelationship is not peculiar to dance alone. And, this symbiosis is explained beautifully in an episode in the *Vishnudharmottara Purana*.

.....

Dance is naturally a multi-dimensional art-form, and it combines poetry and literature, painting and sculpture, nuances of adornment such as clothing and jewelry, along with movement vocabulary, music, and language of a particular global or even regional culture.

.....

Once, King Vajra approaches sage Markandeya and asks to learn the art of sculpting or image-making (*pratima lakshanam*). The sage enlightens him in a sequential way that the king cannot comprehend the art of sculpting unless he learns the art of painting (*citra sutra*), and in order to learn painting he must be well versed in the art of dancing (*nrtta Shastra*), and to understand dancing he must first



acquaint himself with instrumental music (*atodya*), and this, in turn, can be fully grasped only through mastery of vocal music (*gita*).

In dance, this interrelationship is explicit in its expression and so it feels as if it is different from other art forms.

.....

The Native-American shamans speak of the Great Spirit as the Father of creation from whom the soul descends and of Earth as the Mother, for it is she that creates the body for the soul to live in.

.....

TA: You have said that learning starts from the outside and proceeds inwards, and while giving, in terms of performance, it starts from the inside...can you explain?

RAMAA JI: With regard to the journey from the external to the internal and vice versa, we can start by looking at the descriptions that the word 'Dance' bring to mind, such as movement, action, rhythm, stories. However, these are only lateral experiences like the rim of a wheel. The real core of Dance or the axle of the wheel is Stillness. Dancing is Stillness punctuated by movement – not vice versa. It is similar in music also, where the true core is Silence. And it is this still and silent core that we refer to as Spirit. Our classical arts are

rooted in this aspect, and it is this core spiritual essence that the performance or the outward expression of art, aims at radiating. That is what I mean when I say that in performance, the expression is from inside to outside.

However, accessing this inner core is not a casual affair of reach-out-and-touch! It requires '*tapasya*' or penance-like dedication towards mastery of this finite physical form. In fact, all finite objects have been blessed with the capacity to create a portal through which the soul may reintegrate with its Source. This in fact is the very premise of *Tantra Shastra*, which has been described by Swami Satyananda Saraswathi as the "*Science of seeing, feeling and knowing the Infinite in and through the finite*" and as "*being sucked into the Infinite through a whirlpool of material objects and energies.*"

In the performing arts also, it is this body which becomes that finite tool - first for accessing and then for expressing. So, it is the outer layers that have to be penetrated first during the training phase, because we need to start with the gross before we are able to access the subtle. Moreover, limbs that are not conditioned and prepared adequately, cannot manifest the images born in our imaginative realm. However, detailed attention is given not only to the fortification of the external limbs but the internal mind as well. This is because a weakness in the mind is displayed as a weakness in the external body. The science of Yoga clearly warns of this. For example, a person's wobbliness and lack of balance would signify his wobbliness in determination and belief. Therefore, it was towards this end that Indian dance

pedagogy developed as a holistic learning and practice system in order for the body to be in readiness to embody divinity. So, that is what I mean when I say that the training phase followed the formula of 'outside-to-inside'.

TA: Classical Indian Dance is much more than mere Technique. You have spoken of how the different subtle layers of the body must be prepared to fully connect with the dance and communicate to the audience. Can you take us through that process?

RAMAA JI: That phrase you have used – "communicate to the audience" – is the key here. Communication requires a language, and what that language is, depends on what is being communicated through it. Just because Kalidasa's poetry is glorious, we cannot use that to communicate with computers. Computers have their own programming language.

When it comes to performing arts, the term for communication is "*abhinaya*" which literally means, to bring closer (*abhi+nayati*). This suggests the bringing of the *rasika* and the artistic creation close to each other, and enabling the former to experience the appropriate *rasa* of the latter. As I have mentioned earlier, in Indian art, this *rasa* itself is termed as the "twin brother of Supreme Bliss". So, since what the art seeks to communicate is of transcendental nature, this determines the language used for this communication, as well as the training methodology of the body-instrument that will use this specific language.

I have always felt that we do not dance 'with' the body, but we dance 'through' it.

Thus, this human body itself becomes the primary sacred space because this is where the first sprout of movement germinates. And this 'sacred-space' encompasses the entire body-unit, with its limbs, mind, intellect, and spirit. In Dance, it is this space that is traversed first. An understanding of this sacred space becomes clearer when we approach it through the Upanishadic concept of '*panchakosha*' or the gross and subtle layers. These layers are listed as:

- the physical layer nourished by food – *Annamaya*
- the layer of breath and vital energy – *Pranamaya*
- the layer of mind, emotions, and thoughts – *Manomaya*
- the layer of intellect - *Vijnanamaya*
- and finally, the inner layer of Bliss or *Anandamaya*, which is the spiritual core.

A dancer employs all the first four layers in their fullest capacity in accessing the final inner essence, and the preparation begins of course at the physical layer, for this is the gross layer.



sitting positions in three different height levels along with leaping, sliding, circling, and various other space-explorative ways that demonstrated the principles of alignment through stasis, repose, symmetry, asymmetry, etc.

.....

The artistic-journey was a collaborative pilgrimage between the art-maker and the art-receiver, towards a spiritual encounter.

.....

Then, there are contemplative exercises as well. To give a simple example, in order to portray Lord Rama, one cannot just mime the holding of a bow in the left hand and arrow in the right, for these weapons can be held by other characters as well, each with a different tale to tell and therefore different kinesthetic energy. Arjuna the warrior held a bow and arrow, as did Manmatha, the God of love. The similarity between these characters ends with the weapon they carry. Therefore, to portray Lord Rama would involve understanding and meditative reflection on His qualities so that the essence of His nature is imbibed by the dancer, both conceptually and somatically. It is only then that the energy of Lord Rama will pervade the portrayal.

Then, there is the most important element in the training of this expressive art form - adeptness in *satvika abhinaya* which belongs to the realm of the mind. This contained a variety of expressive techniques. First of all, there are eight

determining emotions (love, humor, sorrow, anger, valor, fear, hatred and wonder); Then, come external determinants that answer the questions of what, where, when and why; Then there were planned gestures of the body in response to an emotion - some of these are culturally conditioned; These were all colored by 33 transitory emotions; Finally, comes the ability to invoke spontaneous physical reactions such as shedding real tears, blushing, horripilation, etc.

Only by developing proficiency in *satvika abhinaya* does the dancer develop a physical form that exhibits a contained strength, and yet pulsates with expressive energy. Ironically, only the principle of *satvika abhinaya* can be taught to the students. They cannot really be "trained" in it. That expertise comes only with experience.

In this kind of training pedagogy, we can see that the development of the physical, the energetic or pranic, the emotional, and the intellectual layers have all been taken into consideration, in the preparation of the sacred body-space.

Here, I would also like to point out the respect that is given to the external earth-space in which the dance would be seen. The sacred dances of many traditions from around the world display this deep reverence for Earth with strong earth-bound footwork. It is as if the dancers become the voice of mother Earth and that she begins to sing through their feet. The Native-American shamans speak of the Great Spirit as the Father of creation from whom the soul descends and of Earth as the Mother, for it is she that creates the body for the soul to live in.



Image Courtesy: Kshilpi Saxena

Ramaa Bharadvaj @Chinmaya Naada Bindu Gurukula - Pune

In the Indian practice, no dancer in India would begin the first steps without a *bhoomi-pranam* (Earth prayer) seeking the blessing and forgiveness of mother Earth. This offering performed both before beginning to dance and at the end, consisted of a gesture of gratitude to Earth by touching Her reverentially with both palms and then joining them together over the head (*sahasrara chakra*) to offer gratitude to the Gods, at the eyebrow center (*ajna chakra*) to the Guru and at the heart (*anahat chakra*) to the audience.

Thus, you can see how the intent of the art-form is reflected not only in the theme and content but extends holistically to every aspect, from preparation to presentation.

TA: Classical Indian Dance evolved as a solo art form, in temples as a medium of worship and a spiritual path, to experience universal truth. What is this intangible truth and how does one create a tangible experience of it?

RAMAA JI: First of all, I want to make clear that not all classical dance was sequestered within the temple walls. There were court dancers too who used the classical vocabulary. So, we cannot say that dance evolved in the temples only or as a worship ritual only. In fact, if we refer back to the origin story of Theatre-Arts, the intent is clear, that performance Art was created from the mind of Brahma as an educational tool. The purpose of that education was to uplift towards nobler thinking and higher values. So, the integration into temples became a natural partnership, and the themes reflect the adoration of the highest Universal Being, or God, or Universal Truth or whatever we may want to address this Divinity as.

The method of connecting with this intangible Infinite was to be done through the tangible finite of course. In fact, the book *Srimad Bhagavatam* refers to eight material objects - stone, wood, metal, sandalwood paste or clay, precious stones, paintings, sand, and the image within your heart – as being suitable for creating images into which the Universal Spirit can be summoned and worshipped. And to those who question, how one can create an image of a Supreme Being who is without form, the answer is given by sage Markandeya himself in the *Vishnudharmottara Purana*:

“The entire universe is the vikrti (modification) of Prakrti (the formless). The meditation on the Supreme is possible for an ordinary being only when the formless is endowed with a form; and that form is full of significance.”

These material objects served an important purpose for they formed a *Mandala*, a focal center for tuning into and drawing in

Cosmic Consciousness. Even though the Tantric texts say that any object on earth could become a *Mandala*, they gave a special place to the human body, for while the sculpted and painted images required elaborate rituals in order to be infused with energy, the human body, possessed an immediate aptitude for incarnating the Divine because it was endowed with the capacity for conscious awareness. What it practically means for us is that the body is not to be looked at as an obstruction to spiritual enlightenment but as a tool for achieving greater insights.

And when it came to the dancing body, there was a further significance, for as pointed out by Swami Satyānanda Saraswati, what supercharges a *Mandala* is concentration combined with emotional feeling (*bhāvā*) and devotion (*bhakti*), two aspects inherent in the art of dance. This is the reason why the Śāstras have prescribed that a worship ritual would come to successful completion only with an offering of music and dance and included them as part of *upacāra* (rites of hospitality) in the honoring of the invoked deity.

The idea of making the microcosmic into a receptacle for the macrocosmic can be found in other esoteric practices of the world as well. The Whirling Dervishes of the Mevlevi Order of Sufism demonstrate this through a 7-century old ritual practice known as the *Sema* ceremony, in which, they transform their bodies into a *Mandala* while performing a "dance" of turning. They equate their spinning motion to a "conscious and harmonious participation" in the revolution of particles in the atoms and to an intentional replication of the cycle of life. During this dance, which they refer to

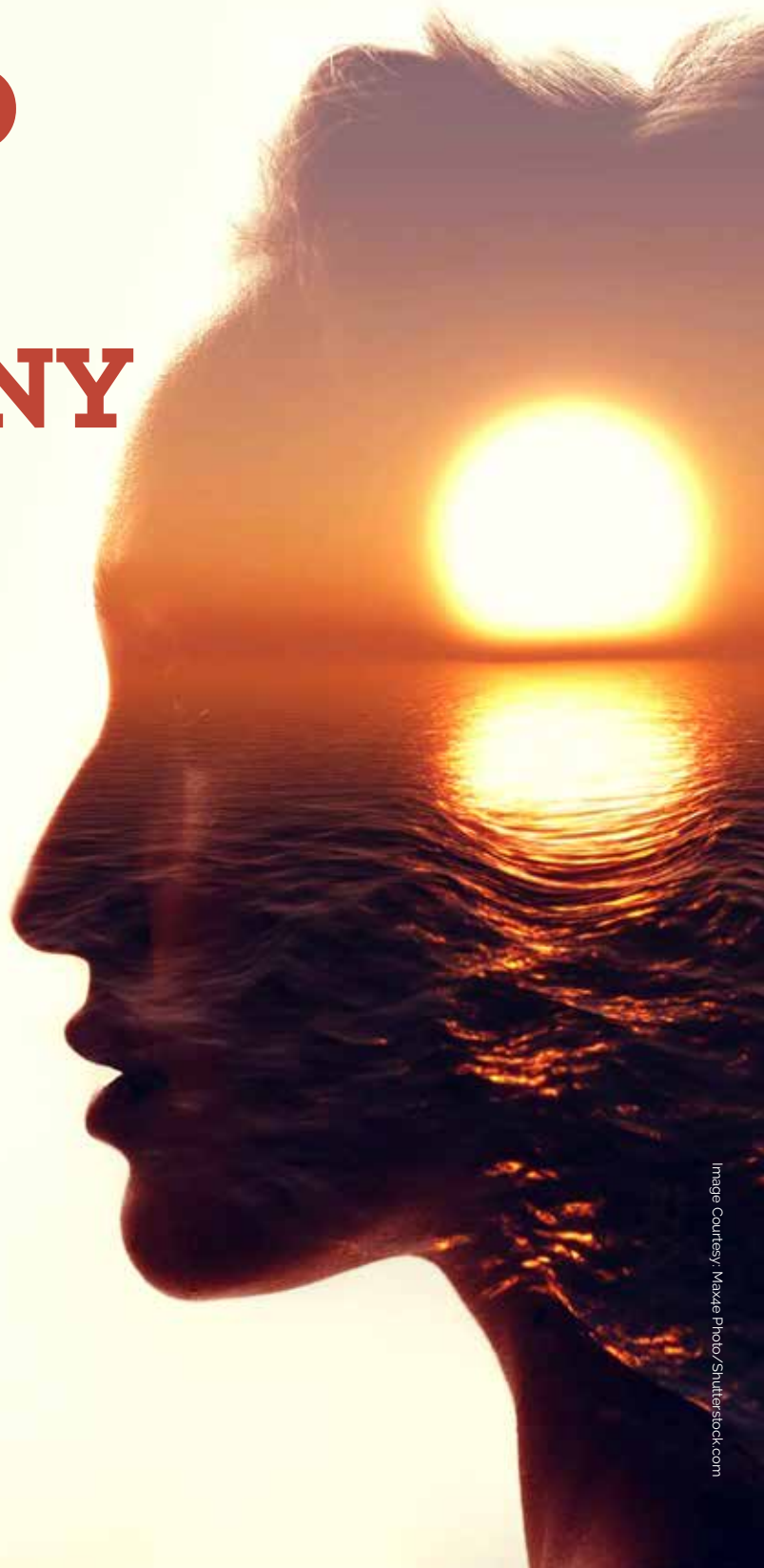
as the "turning towards Truth", they open the right palm to the sky to receive God's blessing and direct the left to the earth as a means of passing on the spiritual gifts to all of creation. ॐ

Further in the interview, Ramaa ji sheds light on the importance of transmitting Tradition, which she views not as something etched in stone, but as a vibrant, flowing, creatively relevant river, that can transport cultural values to future generations. [Click here to read the full article.](#)



DARE TO LIVE IN HARMONY

By Shraddha Shetty



The times that we have experienced together in the last few months have been unique. There is no doubt that it has been challenging for many, but my attempt in this article is to highlight the special opportunities that I discovered even in such moments.

Due to the lockdown across the world, many were physically isolated from one another for extended periods of time. While this necessary action forced many of us to retreat physically from the masses, it was also a rare opportunity to do the same with our thoughts, to discover our own authentic ideas. In solitude, there is perhaps the possibility to encounter ourselves, and question: Am I happy with the way I have been living so far? What among the various aspects of my life is important for me? What meaning do I want to give to life?

Amidst various roles and responsibilities, it may seem that we never have enough time to reflect on the truth of our own beliefs. But with the lockdown, Mr. Time suddenly appeared at our doorstep and we could no longer continue to blame the lack of time.

Surrounded with communication from the media, and conditioned by majority opinions, it is easy to forget to listen to our own inner voice. It is easy to get influenced, fall prey to herd mentality, and fail to recognize that sometimes we end up automatically thinking and behaving just like everyone else, even though it doesn't make us happy. Amidst various roles and responsibilities, it may seem that we never have enough time to reflect on the truth of our own beliefs. But with the lockdown, Mr. Time suddenly appeared at our doorstep and we could no longer continue to blame the lack of time. We had enough time in hand, and isolation, to begin to ask these essential questions. Used wisely, it could have been a special opportunity to go to the root of our own authentic ideas and thoughts without any fear of being different, being frowned upon, or the insecurity of being rejected by peers and colleagues. It could have been a time to investigate whether our past actions reflect our inner ideas, and how we might redirect our future.

Maybe some discovered that they wanted to continue living in the same way; others may have discovered that there is



need for inner and outer change. Either way, the pause and solitude offered the opportunity to reassess and harmonize life with a fresh perspective. In the words of Gandhi ji, "True Happiness is when what we think, what we feel and what we do, is in harmony."

Personally I realised that in the past many of my decisions were influenced by the desire for personal comfort, at all levels, at the cost of following what I knew in my heart was right. This resulted in dissatisfaction and mediocrity. I came to the conclusion that life is too short to waste time and that now is a good time to get out of my comfort, renew the search for what I don't know, and change the direction of certain areas.

The pause and solitude offered the opportunity to reassess and harmonize life with a fresh perspective.

In my own experience, perhaps for the first time, there was nothing to be afraid of, between me and myself. The unprecedented circumstances of my solitude made it easier to achieve the mental clarity to determine the right direction for my life, one that would be meaningful.

On the other hand, many fortunate ones were locked down with immediate family without many external resources. Naturally, they might have gone through a variety of emotions: frustration, irritation, mood swings, etc. But together we had the wonderful possibility to discover that by developing internal virtues we can harmonize the differences by overcoming our own weaknesses, and support one another to taste unity. Harmony, as many may have realized, is not about making everyone listen to **me**, as the dictator of the family. Rather, it is about learning to accept the differences, and by extending ourselves, finding creative ways to be happy together. You don't get harmony when everyone sings the same note; harmony arises when different notes come together, to complement one another.

I want to note that practically it meant that to bring harmony into the family, every individual had to extend themselves a little bit, in order to bring a little more understanding and patience; to think of what is right for all, before only thinking of one's own self; to put personal comforts aside, and help when it is right to, to clean the dishes when it is right to, to listen more, and speak up when it is right to do. In short it requires compassion, to sacrifice the ego sometimes, in order to help one another.

These moments also allowed us to see our own suffering in proportion. After all, we were all facing similar circumstances; our neighbours, people who work for us, people we work for, etc. Amidst the helplessness, the fear, and anxiety that we all collectively experienced, there was an opportunity to empathize and be sensitive to the fact that there were others who were struggling too, maybe more than us. Everyone needed love, encouragement, and support. Sometimes, even the smallest gesture was enough to touch somebody's heart and make a positive impact on their life. Small acts of kindness, a smile, a message, or a listening ear was enough in many cases, and it did not need mammoth efforts to make a real difference.

In this way, perhaps these moments revealed a glimpse of the glory and potential of our altruism, our compassion. Maybe this is our natural state. And maybe it is in such a state that we are most satisfied and happy. While there are many things that are beyond our control, the lockdown helped me to discover that I had the freedom to choose harmony over discord, prioritize giving before taking, exercise altruism before egoism; seek unity over separation; and discover that in this lies true happiness.

*Let us all dare to
live in harmony by
allowing our
authentic inner
voice to direct our
every future action.
With the certainty
of this inner
direction it will be
easier to walk
with confidence
into, to our
uncertain future.*

Let us all dare to live in harmony by allowing our authentic inner voice to direct our every future action. With the certainty of this inner direction it will be easier to walk with confidence into our uncertain future. Our virtues will act as the tools to manoeuvre through pleasant as well as stormy times. Let us stand in unison and take responsibility, both individually and collectively, to recreate our society based on goodness and truth. ☯☯



STEPPING BACK INTO THE WORLD OF HEROES

By Rahil Mehta



A child's journey to adulthood is often a mixed bag. It's a time of learning and challenges. Skills and abilities are developed, as are likes and dislikes. He quickly learns the rules of the world that he lives in. And facing a new world for the first time, his simplest obstacles look like gigantic monsters. In these daunting encounters, heroes and their tales of magical and audacious adventures often play an important role. The "Super" men and women, become guardians, while dreams of magic lamps and genies make just about anything possible!

How simply one is able to live in two worlds at the same time! In one he faces confusion and obstacles, and catastrophic falls; these he dusts off to face the next day, again with the same curiosity. In the other world of Heroes, he is protected, and sometimes even takes on the invincibility, nobility, and generosity of his favourite champion, living his most noble aspirations. With one leg in each world, he is both vulnerable and unstoppable, at the same time! And this is no contradiction, it is real. So what if he gets into trouble...who doesn't? The hope of a victorious tomorrow and a zest for life quickly return, because even the greatest Heroes fall; and they stand back up stronger than ever.

Is it really so impractical to wield the heroic sword of compassion and humanness in the 'real' world?



As the years pass, however, and the child becomes a young adult, a dissonance sometimes develops; we may call it a "reality check", or the need to prove oneself in the 'real' world. The vibrant world of imagination and adventure now seems unrealistic and childish, and the young adult suddenly doubts his own invincibility. These doubts break down the defences of his noble aspirations that had pulled him through many storms in his youth. Is it really so impractical to wield the heroic sword of compassion and humanness in the 'real' world? Or did our protagonist just lose sight of the spirit of adventure? This is a worthy question, as it may open our eyes once again, to a world forgotten.

*We fear the
innumerable things
we cannot control,
and avoid taking
responsibility
over the things
that we can.*

Instead of his own conscience, he starts to depend on external re-assurance, recognition, and praise. The notion of success becomes dependant on the approval of others; and he avoids taking decisions, lest he face the loneliness of failure. While it is true that the "real world" has its obligations, do these obligations justify hiding behind the endless demands of a profession? Isn't there anything important beyond meeting society's economic and social norms?

And here he encounters his fragility; fearful that a single naïve decision will "break" him, he becomes an unwilling student of the complicated 'Ways of the World' and is convinced that this is normal. It expresses in a seemingly countless number of ways.



Some among us attack anyone that challenges us; to show our power, rather than using the criticism to improve.

Many are happy as 'Kings' of their comfort zones, building tall walls to protect what is familiar, even if these walls shut us off from connecting compassionately with one another.

Often we may procrastinate at the crossroads of choices, comforted that others are stuck too. We fear the time wasted in confusion and wrong decisions, and promise ourselves to "work on it tomorrow" rather than daring to move forward.

We are anxious of the uncertainties of life and find ourselves unwittingly running a losing race against time.

Does this sound familiar? Today perhaps, such fragility is a common malaise. We fear the innumerable things we cannot control, and avoid taking responsibility over the things that we can. Hence, we are satisfied to go with the flow rather than take the initiative to build our own path. This is but a "house of cards" compared to the fortress of imagination and dreams we once had!

But do we dare to see that the "inner youth" is a choice? Can we put our survival at stake, so that we might "Live" the dream of a better tomorrow? We need to make the decision to exercise the "inner force", the strength and vitality of the familiar Heroes of another world! A world in which we are the "best versions of ourselves" - superheroes who uphold goodness and truth. Here justice prevails, and beauty is not lost to efficiency. It is a world where we are not fragile, but strong and ennobled by Virtue. This world waits patiently, within us all.

We knew that inner world once, and can dare to claim it once again. Maybe this is the antidote to fragility. To break boundaries and conquer new avenues; to live our potential, our destiny. Can we venture to Live once again in both worlds, the inner and the outer? So that tomorrow, when we face new and different challenges, we will know that the hero within us is ready. Let us dare to become the example of one who faces challenges, and lives to tell the tale; the story of victory through justice, truth, beauty and goodness, the story of a true "Super Hero". ☺☺



THE ACROPOLITAN
July - September 2020
Volume 7 - Issue 3

Editorial Department
Editor: Harianto H Mehta
Editorial Team:
Malini Nair, Manjula Nanavati,
Sukesh Motwani, Ashik Bhuta,
Pooja Arambhan

Design Department
Janki Shah, Neha Mehta,
Sanjana Nanodkar

**New Acropolis
Cultural Organization (India)**
Yaron Barzilay
National Director
A-0 Connaught Mansions
Opp. Colaba Post Office
Colaba, Mumbai 400005
Tel: +91 22 2216 3712
Email: info@acropolis.org.in
Web: www.acropolis.org.in

PAN: AADCN2407J
CIN: U92412MH2010NPL200490
80G Cert: CIT(E)/80G/2062/
2016-17 (6/2/17)

The Acropolitan is published in India, by New Acropolis Cultural Organization. Reprints of individual articles are obtainable on application to the editor. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means without the prior written permission of the copyright owner.

PHILOSOPHY

Philosophy, when it is practical, is educational. It helps us to know ourselves and to improve ourselves. To be a philosopher is a way of life committed to the best aspirations of humanity.



CULTURE

The practice of human values is the basis for a model of active and participative Culture, which brings out the qualities of each person, broadens the horizons of the mind and opens the human being up to all the expressions of the spirit.



VOLUNTEERING

Volunteering is the natural expression of a spirit of union with life and humanity, which manifests in the practice of values such as unselfishness, commitment and striving for the common good.



OUR CENTERS

Mumbai | COLABA CENTER

A-0 Ground Floor, Connaught Mansion,
Opp. Colaba Post Office, Colaba,
Mumbai, Maharashtra
Tel: +91 22 2216 3712

Mumbai | KHAR BRANCH

Parvati Nivas, 1st Floor Anand Vihar Society,
19A Road. Khar-Danda Road, Khar (W)
Mumbai, Maharashtra
Tel:+91 98330 33239

Pune | KOREGAON PARK BRANCH

Plot no.22, Gangajanan Society,
Lane no. 7 Koregaon Park, South Main Road
Pune, Maharashtra 411001
Tel:+91 99301 98253