

From Form and Focus to Freedom



Murshid SAM with Moineddin Jablonski

1966. A young man, called Carl Jablonski, calls at the door of an elderly man called Samuel Lewis. He wants a Zen teacher. More students follow and soon Samuel Lewis – a student of both the venerable Nyogen Senzaki and Sufi Inayat Khan – is the teacher of a whole flock of hippies in San Francisco. Remarkable, as Sam is in his seventies and his students are in their early twenties, with flowers in their hair, living in the age of acid.

Sam has never touched drugs ('I am already high by myself') but doesn't condemn the young hippies. He sees their search is genuine, and wants to improve on their methods. So he tries to teach them grounded spirituality with a lasting effect, not triggered by chemicals that ruin their bodies.

At some point, Sam changes his course from Zen to Sufism and Sam becomes Murshid SAM. His heart guided him to teach under the umbrella of Sufism. Why not? Mysticism knows no denominations, but transcends all differences.

Around that time, Carl becomes Moineddin. He was to become the successor of Murshid SAM.

Murshid SAM teaches his students breathing and walking techniques, mostly derived from Buddhism, Sufism and Hinduism. He leads his students in a circle dance and asks them all to sing Allah and Namu Amida Butsu. The Dances of Universal Peace are born.

New as they are, Murshid SAM's dances ancestry goes back a long way, for they are a brew of mantra yoga and walking meditation, mixed with the body prayer of the Middle East and spiced with sacred phrases from all traditions. Actually, 'chanted body prayers' would cover this form of embodied spirituality more than 'dances', but that is mere semantics.

Murshid SAM writes that the Bible asks us to see the body as the temple of God and that it is about time to actually start doing this. So he teaches spiritual dances with a very simple folkdance-type choreography.

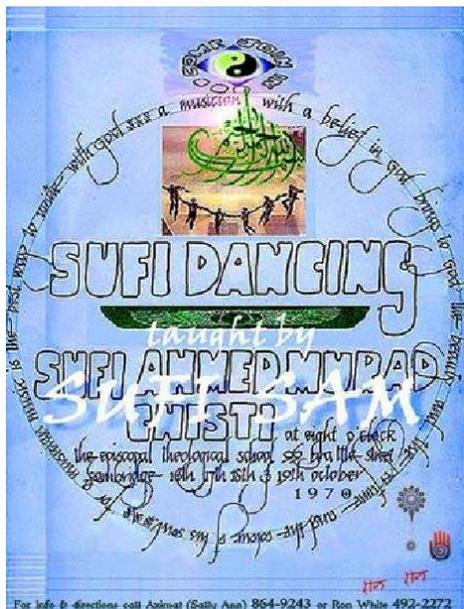
Through the form, they learn focus, for SAM's dances seem simple, but ask for a great deal of awareness. They offer you nothing to hang on to, no nice melodies to hide behind and their focus makes all of them Zen practices, even if you chant 'Allah'.



Murshid SAM walking with children

Once form and focus are mastered, joy enters. Not joy triggered by earthly means, but joy from within. As Joe Miller, one of the Godfathers of this movement and Murshid SAM's best friend, says, 'Joy is the natural state of the heart.'

Some students even experience the freedom that is the result of a long investment in inner work with ego stuff and growth on the spiritual path. Free from ego, free from wanting, free from clasp and clinging, what more can you want? They become grounded teachers in Buddhism or Sufism (or both) and many of them are still with us. They passed Murshid SAM's teachings on to students like the person writing this article.



2015. We just finished our first training weekend around the Dances of Universal Peace. In our preparation, we focused on three basic ingredients to teach these dances as a spiritual path for inner and outer growth towards freedom: techniques, attunement and awareness.

The students come for techniques, but we tell them awareness and focus come first. The more you see, the more you learn. It is not about taking a step or making a turn, but about being aware that you do this and why and how you do it. Seen thus, the dances are also a practice in mindfulness. In the afternoon session, the feedback given encourages the students to realize that there is a lot of work to do. Not only must they learn the techniques but, more importantly, learn to be

focused. And they learn to be attuned. When you chant the *Gate Gate* from the Heart Sutra and connect with the experience of the dance and with the mantra, everyone believes you. With your attunement as an example, all can enter the meaning of the mantra.

At the beginning of the weekend, we ask the students if the dances are spiritual practices or not. Some don't know what to answer. They are confused because the dances are also joyful, and spiritual practices are not seen as such, unless you are a very experienced practitioner.

Now all understand that the question was rhetorical. For how can a practice in focus, awareness and attunement not be a spiritual practice?

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