Chitresh Talks
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On February 28th, HINDUISM TODAY met with Chitresh Das. His youthful exuberance, entertaining candor, honesty and total love of Kathak temporarily hid his enormous talent, fame and whatever ego you might expect to find.

HINDUISM TODAY: Your religious background?

CHITRESH DAS: Since I am a Bengali from Calcutta, we are heavily tantric-oriented - Mother worship, Shaivite, too. I was raised among Catholics - my mother Protestant, my father Hindu. But, because we are dancers, Nataraja becomes the dominant Deity in the house. My mother gets up at four in the morning and cleans the whole altar, the flowers and everything.

HT: Why did you leave India?

CD: The late 60's and 70's was the time when the whole world was wanting to break out from the old into the new. The Almighty brought me. I was destined out of thousands of Kathak dancers. I thought I was coming to teach. On the contrary - at this age, I am just beginning to learn again...I was once called by Yoga Journal the Johnny Appleseed of Kathak dance. My company was all blondes and brunettes for 17 years. But now, I have Indian kids - God's grace. My dream came true. I broke the myth that Westerners can't [dance].

HT: Is teaching Westerners hard?

CD: If they have the strength to endure, for 10 to 15 years, perhaps the light shows through...They are brought up with hamburgers and hot dogs. I don't tell them what not to eat. I believe you have come to learn dance. You are what you are. But, when you hold the portrait of Lord Shiva, you better know what Lord Shiva is all about. If you are just hoping to take Him as a Hindu God, you will not go any further, one inch. You must say 'Lord Shiva!' and then you go into the dance. That state of mind I cannot teach. I can only lead.

HT: Are you a vegetarian?

CD: No, on the contrary, I enjoy eating all kinds of [meat]. You can call me a lecher, or whatever. It doesn't make any difference. I am, you know, we are artists. But I am also in tune with Lord Shiva. When He wants to see me. He can. My life is not for myself. What I like to do most is offer to the Almighty. I am dancing, trying to get His attention.

HT: Rules for your students?

CD: There is no dope. You cannot smoke marijuana and then come to the class. You cannot drink alcohol and then come to the class. You cannot make love and then come to the class. They are living in modern day American life, and I don't try to change that. Indian Hindus in America are also living an American life. HT Do you yourself do any traditional Hindu sadhana practices?

CD: My dancing is the total out and out. That's what I do.

HT: So you don't do puja?

CD: Dance is a puja. When you are [in dance] offering petals of the flowers, calling the names, you are opening the altar - bringing Brahman, bringing Vishnu, and bringing the Destroyer. We are living it [puja], with hands and body and mind.

HT: Do you do any meditation?

CD: Again, that [dance] is meditation. Because the tal (beat) is going on underneath, you are dancing on it. In a second, if your mind is off, bang, you are off the rhythm. So the dance is a pure yogic form.

HT: Do you teach about the guru to your students?

CD: You can't teach Indian dance without this.

HT: Are you a guru?

CD My mother said I'm too young to be a guru. Another said: 'When you are old, when you learn to be patient, when you learn to control yourself and when you have the strength to take care of other people, then you are a guru.' I am learning at this age. I am starting over - divorced after 17 or 18 years of knowing the same lady.

HT: Do you have children?

No, I raised my ex-wife's daughter as my own. My wife worked so hard - I have to acknowledge her contribution. But also, I am surrounded by all these ladies. They come and dance, systematically - three, four hours, taking the names of the gurus, going through all the rituals. But I tell them, 'You don't have to believe what I am saying or doing, but you have to do it as a part of your dance.'

HT: Do you believe in reincarnation?

CD: My father wants me to believe in it. I question everything. I don't believe or not believe it, like UFO'S.

HT What about karma?

CD: I believe it absolutely.

HT: Do you believe in the existence of the Gods and the Three Worlds?

CD: There's a different way of looking at it as a dancer. I am more into the Entity which is always living and is always there. From time to time, I go into that realm and I pray the Almighty takes that power in me and helps me...and doesn't make me look like a jerk. Whether there is heaven or hell, it doesn't make any difference to me. I am here right now. Lord Siva...Life, every aspect of life has to be there. Even if I am drinking alcohol or beer or eating meat, I am not away from that [dance] element. I'm not going to say, 'Oh no, no, no, I don't...' That's bull. In spite of that, I have the Entity coming to me. And, in my arrogance, I get slapped. In my humbleness, Shiva takes care of me.

HT: How is Kathak unique?

CD: Kathak can take off anywhere. You should be able to mingle with anything. So it takes off on anything. I can dance with the Flamenco people, or jazz...Kathak could be meditation. Kathak could totally be your own practice, however you wish.

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