

The Dance of Leela
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In Hinduism, Leela can be loosely translated as "divine play." Lila is a way of describing all reality as the outcome of the creative play between Brahma the creator, Vishnu the preserver, and Shiva the destroyer.

Their dance, of creating, destroying and recreating is one in which we are to be present as witnesses, as those who accept that we are not the only creators on this earth and all that we see does not belong to us alone.

We are not the originators or the end point. Our goals, say Hinduism, should not be to imprint the world with the signature of our lives but to love, be present, and gain awareness. Or maybe better said: to find the flow of the dance and join it with joy. For Hinduism this involves "cutting through the entanglement"¹ of time, desire, reactivity and attachment.

Shouldn't be too hard, right? Oy vey! If only that were true! Have you ever tried walking through an Indian street full of cars, rickshaws, cows, bicycles and people that has no sidewalks, when everything comes within an inch of your ankles, while being joyfully non-reactive?

The Indian people are. They laugh and talk and ring bells so the gods will hear their prayers that hang on temples tucked between shops. Gary and I were not so much! To find your place in the dance and dance with grace and peace. What an art form.

I remember when Gary and I were at the Annie Margaret Barr Orphanage, about which I spoke last week. Briefly in case you were not here last week, The Annie Margaret Barr Children's Village, located in a small Unitarian village in the Khasi Hills India, opened in February 2009. Annie Margaret Barr was a British Unitarian minister who went to the Khasi hills in the 1930s located in the Northeast corner of India, above Bangladesh and below Bhutan.

She opened orphanages and medical centers and schools. The orphanage she opened closed in 1973 when she died in the Khasi Hills where her ashes are buried. She is a hero there to this day.

In this beloved orphanage opened almost 10 years ago now, where none of the 24 children wish to be adopted, each day, the cook would give Gary and I something special for breakfast or lunch, an extra piece of bread, a chapati, an egg. Gary and I, the oldest at the tables and therefore those who burned the fewest calories, who had worked less than any of those there, who had more body fat than any of those present...were given the most

¹ Heinrich Zimmer, Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilization (New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1974).

calories at every meal, those meals of rice and dahl made of beans and lentils, that were so scant in calories.

I suffered so around those crowded tables eating more than the children. Each time I was offered this extra food, I tried to give it away. "Do you want it," I would ask Alisha or Krum or Sunita or Ban. "No," they would say in turn. "I don't like it or I'm not hungry." I knew it wasn't true.

When I spoke to Khlur Mukhim about this, he admonished me. Khlur was one of our hosts, along with his sister Barri and brother Banjob from the Mukhim family. We visited with them often in Shillong, the small city about 2 hours from the village where they live, when we left the orphanage. They also have a small house in Kharang near the orphanage.

They all grew up in Kharang and their parents knew and worked with Annie Margaret Barr. Their mother was a nurse and their father was a healer whom people traveled for miles to see. Khlur said to me,

"Linda, take the food. The children would not take it from you because the rules of allowing you to be the guest and them to be the host are that you eat and enjoy those things. That was the name of that dance, that part of Leela. Let it be. Play your part. Who is to say what your role will lead to next; what your role means? Give what you are there to give, what you are there to offer: your heart, your love, your meaning. Find a place where the dance allows you to offer your gifts."

The dance of Leela. I asked Khlur and others, "So this dance of Leela, this devotional play, this ability to know one is divinely loved, carried, that one's circumstance is not forever, that indeed forever is a continuum in which one is not alone and into which one will be born again and again to many different circumstances and abilities and ways of being, some with obvious sufferings and some with sufferings less obvious...this dance of Leela and its divine love is something everyone knows they are part of?"

"Yes. Everyone knows in India. It is something we know as soon after we are born. Who is to say," some said to me, "if your sufferings are more or less than those you are so worried about Linda?"

Oh goodness, those whose faces I still see in my dreams suffered greatly. Once, in Siliguri India, a great, large, polluted, crazy city with cows that would lie in the middle of the busiest city streets: cars and rickshaws and motorbikes and bicycles and everyone going in every which way with a congestion that our busiest highways at rush hour makes look like child's play. The cows' heads would stick out into one lane of the traffic and their huge bodies would stick out into the other lane. And cows are sacred you know so every just went around them, beeping and passing each other. No one was hit or bumped or yelled at. Amazing dance of Leela this.

So this one day, we were to catch our train in Siliguri on our way to Shillong as we were beginning our time at the orphanage. The train was 8 and half hours late and not even the

station master knew when it was coming or which track it would come in on. It was about 90 degrees that day and we could not eat the food at the station and there were so many people crowded everywhere that it was dizzying.

And a mother with her baby who was naked but with a tiny tee shirt, asked me for money. I gave her some. I most often did. And then she asked for more. I was tired and hot and I needed to change tickets for another train which was a walk to god knows where and on the way, we stepped over 2 boys dressed in rags, one with his legs over the other while they slept, and the woman with the baby held onto my jacket while I walked, Please, she said, Baby. And I walked and said, I'm sorry, I'm sorry. And she held onto my jacket for about 2 blocks and then let go. Later, 8 hours later, when we pulled out, I saw where she lived. Outside the train tracks, with the poorest of the poor. The children had on only little tee shirts and no pants or shoes..

"Did she know she was divinely loved," I asked Khlur? "Yes," he said, "she does. She does. She knows that this too will pass, that she too will be reborn and that this suffering will end. She too knows that you suffer Linda. And you, if you do not have the courage to look in her eyes and see her and her child, then you have lost the opportunity to experience this form of god."

What should we make of this? It did not ease my mind.

People watched us in that train station, waiting for us to decide where we would sit. I wanted to give every single thing away that my back was tired of carrying anyway. I wanted to empty my pockets and give it all away and be free of the conscience that bore down on me while my feet burned my privileged footprints into the cement.

We saw a sign that said "First class waiting room." We went in there even though our tickets were second class. No one questioned us there; not for the 8 long hours we waited there. It had AC that worked fairly well. The bathroom where one squatted over a ceramic hole, were dirty but not outrageous. Their scent still filled the 1st class waiting room. The woman who cleaned them was in her 80s and did so with bare feet. I never saw her leave the bathroom.

The hours lag. We drank bottled water and ate packaged cookies and a man sat near to us who was reading about healing the sick. How could I resist? "What are you reading?" I asked.

He was a Christian. Once he was very sick. Paralyzed. People who believe in Jesus healed him and now he heals others, or Jesus heals others through him. He just places hands on. He used to be a professor. He was a well-dressed, middle aged, professional man. He was traveling to a village to a place where he has heard of someone who was very sick. He would be doing this healing or exorcism there. He did consider it a drawing out of evil spirits, a letting in of love, the healing love of Jesus.

We talked about Jesus, god, love- there inside of the tangled mass of humanity. While he spoke, I watched a man take a pile off his back that was a 100 pounds or more, unload it, unfold shirt after shirt, lay them out like goods on a blanket for sale.

I watched a girl maybe 2 years old, lace skirt and shirt, heavy mascara, sandals, walking beside what must be her father who pats her head; I watched men pushing carts of packages piled so high their frail, strong bodies showed every muscle; I watched the women breast feeding; I watched the children begging; I watched the families laughing too and telling stories and feeding each other and loving each other through time and I listened for a long time to a stranger tell me that Jesus died for my sins and that he is not about converting people but about helping people decide who they trust. I thought about that for while: Who do I trust?

I watched Hindus in their saris with bhindis on their foreheads feeding their children dahl and I watch Muslims covered in Hijabs rocking their babies back and forth on the floor sitting on scarves and I watch Jains and Zoroastrians and Christians and Buddhists and I watch us all trying to get where we are going and to somehow get there together and suddenly I had to speak to this good, gentle, healer of a man who was speaking to me. I said:

I think Jesus is a beautiful person and you seem a good man too. I believe that what you are saying about being able to heal people is so worthy.

I look around this station where we sit and I see these good people all loving their children to the best of their ability and feeding them what they believe is the right food in the right way through the right rituals and I see all of our holy difference here and I cannot believe that a loving god would send us only one savior, into this mass of humanity, (and nowhere is there visible, no where on earth is there visible the mass of humanity like in India) I cannot believe god would send us only one savior, one true messiah who was a middle eastern man who lived centuries ago. If there is a god, then this god would be wise and would know that we would need more than one way to know love, beauty, truth, hope, freedom, knowledge and would give us the capacity to know and love god through many forms and truths.

He listened thoughtfully but then said that the only religion that offered a savior was Christianity. And I countered, but why do we need a savior; perhaps Christianity is the only religion that creates the need for a savior? But Linda he said, we need to be saved, we need to be resurrected from the dead or else- Is this is all we live for? I need that to give me hope.

Ah, that one. And then I said, but what if I want this to be enough? What if I don't want to be resurrected but want this to be enough, wanted to make this life into my crucible of hope, wanted to make this canvas, this time into the sacred now where what I do and how I do it matters ultimately and I am ultimately accountable to it? What if I do not want to be forgiven for all of my sins after I die but want to live accountable to them now?

And he said, but what if your soul wanders without your body after you die without the heaven you deserve? And I answered, "Then I hope your loving Jesus finds me and brings me in because I have tried to live a good life."

His train came then. He took my hand and whispered in my ear, "Accept the lord Jesus Christ into your life as your savior." And left.

Later that day, after our train came and then we took an 9 hour train ride with bunk mates and sticky food on metal trays and arrived in the dark at 9:30pm in an even bigger city and took a wild taxi ride for 3 more hours through 18 wheelers that were stopped, belching black smoke into the air and around hair pin corners where our kind, young driver would pass everyone, I do admit I said a prayer to Jesus just in case this was my last night and heaven was an option!

So, this is what Leela taught me that I am trying not to forget:

- Give what you have to give, even when it hurts, even when someone might ask for more than you can give because of it. You can say no when you need to.
- Leave some for yourself for when you need it too.
- Be grateful for what you have in this life, even if others look like they have so much more than you do. You never know what another suffers.

- Realize what you can and cannot control and give up the rest with love.
- Listen carefully to others and then offer your perspective with humility and compassion.
- Be accountable for your transgressions in the here and now.

May you dance your dance of Leela with hope and compassion my friends while the gods laugh and nudge us, kicking and screaming, toward enlightenment.

Amen.