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Drugless Ecstasy

Attaining altered states through shamanic dance and chanting

By **Dara Colwell** Tuesday, May 4 2004

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"We're calling in the North, South, East, and West. We're calling in energy for the ancient shaman to awaken within us all," declares Parashakti, an Israeli shaman, as the aroma of smoldering sage drifts through Manhattan's Be Yoga studio where she's leading her biweekly "Earthdance" workshop on a chilly Saturday. "Hey-ye, hey-ye, hey-ye, hey-yo, hey-ye, hey-ye, he-ey-yo," she begins chanting with pristine clarity. Twenty-odd participants gather around her, echoing the refrain, gearing themselves up for trance dance. This isn't the kind of trance fare electronica enthusiasts follow. It's shamanic trance—and getting into the groove has a decidedly spiritual twist.

Trance dance, a body-centered healing technique for reaching altered states, is one of many shamanic practices experiencing a burgeoning revival. Considered synonymous with prayer by indigenous cultures worldwide, dance has been used historically to move the mind into extraordinary states of awareness. According to Bat-Haim, who's been hailed by *Newsweek* as a trendsetter, trance dance is a moving meditation. The practice melds dance, electronic world music, shamanic breath work, and "internal therapy." "Dance is an ancient universal practice," says Parashakti, who has conducted workshops since 1999. "Moving the body allows you to explore and release deep fears and attachments. The body holds onto trauma. When you dance, you just move it out."

As she speaks, she clasps an owl's wing, one of many items in her shamanic tool kit. Her supplies also include velvet blindfolds, which



photo: Leslie Van Stelten

Parashakti Bat-Haim

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participants wear to stimulate a deeper experience. She explains that the blindfold mimics the darkness of night, when ancient cultures held ecstatic rituals. Dancing in the darkness also frees participants to sidestep their restlessly analytic and active egos, and to greet their inner spirit selves. In other words, there's no need to look cool on the dance floor. "It allows that voice that says 'I'm not doing it right' to literally recede into the darkness," Parashakti says, emphasizing that the experience is about seeing the "inner light." Participant Vivian Rose, an opera singer and committed trance dancer, observes that "because your mind's not in the way, it awakens your intuitive sense. When you trance dance, you become the answer."

The resurgence of trance dance and other spiritual practices is not surprising in New York, where the post-9-11 landscape has spurred an increased awareness of our society's spiritual deficits. According to [Daniel Pinchbeck](#), author of *Breaking Open the Head* (Broadway Books, 2002, \$14), which includes a cultural history of shamanism, there's "definitely a growing current of interest" in the practice here. "The city already overloads the circuits. There's so much psychic-energy smog in New York City," says the Gotham native. "As people are becoming more sensitive to spirit, shamanic trance dance and breath work seem appropriate."

A crucial element of shamanic journeying is connecting to inner wisdom in order to discover one's "soul purpose." Alongside communal practices like trance dance, there are a number of contemporary urban shamanic healers who offer group and individual ceremonies. Sessions range from drumming circles and group meditations to rituals resembling diagnostic therapy—or what shaman [Itzhak Beery](#), another Israeli, jokingly refers to as "shamanic surgery." An advertising executive who moonlights as a shaman, Beery—who says the jobs are not dissimilar—trained with Ecuadoran Quechua

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shamans. He sees his work as a practical tool, more than merely spiritual.

"This is about fulfilling one's potential and understanding the true self," he says. "I help people reconnect with the true 'them,' and there are no words to describe the feeling. The experience is so deep." Beery conducts individual healing sessions from his West Village office, using candles, eggs, flowers, stones, herbs, bells, and cigarettes (tobacco is a ceremonial offering) during his rituals. During a one-to-two-hour session, Beery focuses on diagnosing a client's energetic and spiritual blockages and cleansing them, which, in turn, stimulates healing. "It's like taking a spiritual bath," he says, noting that in South America shamanic work is standard, akin to a dental checkup. "In the shamanic vision there is no division between health and the soul. It's all one."

"Oneness" is an important tenet in shamanism because all people and objects are seen as a manifestation of a singular source. As a result, shamanism easily coexists alongside other religious disciplines, which furthers its appeal. New Jersey shaman Miranda Ryan, trained in eclectic methods including those of the Lakota Sioux, says shamanism's accessibility and universality have allowed urbanites to adapt its techniques with significant results.

"This work brings you to a doorway within yourself, so you understand who you are and why you're on this planet," she says, fingering a Tibetan dorje, a ceremonial object. Ryan, who speaks dreamily with her eyes closed, likens the practice to spiritual therapy, with "awakening" as its goal. She uses an assortment of tools, such as essential oils, Indian rattles, quartz crystals, and Siberian fossils, to welcome spirits and lead her clients on a spiritual journey. This can literally happen anywhere—Ryan makes house calls—and usually lasts over an hour. During a session at a midtown holistic center, Ryan provides singing commentary in a voice that would go over well on Broadway. "The point of my work is to help others open their hearts and remind them to walk in beauty, even in this concrete city," she says. ""Life is too amazing a gift to live it half asleep."

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