



SURVIVAL OF BUDDHIST ETHICAL AND AESTHETIC VALUES IN SOUTH INDIAN DANCE TRADITIONS – A STUDY

Dr. Pooja Anil Hirwade
Assistant Professor,
PGTD Fine Arts, RTM Nagpur University

Abstract

Buddhism through its philosophical doctrines, monastic institutions and values, has left an enduring impact on India's performing art practices. Also, the 8 classical dance styles of India, through their rich gestural vocabulary and rasa-bhava system have greatly promoted and preserved the Buddhist Ethical and Aesthetic values. This paper examines the survival and continuity of Buddhist ethical and aesthetic values within South Indian classical dance traditions, with specific reference to Bharatanatyam and Kuchipudi. The paper also highlights parallels between Buddhist principles and ideals and the aesthetic framework of rasa, particularly Shanta and Karuna rasa. This study is based on interdisciplinary approach combining textual analysis, visual culture studies, and practice-based insights drawn from the lived experience of the dancer.

Keywords: Buddhism; South Indian Classical Dance; Bharatanatyam; Kuchipudi; Buddhist Ethics; Aesthetic Values; Rasa Theory

Introduction

Classical Dance is not just a performance art. It intertwines with religion, philosophy, rituals and sensory aesthetics. One reason dance exists is that it lets a person express himself in ways that words, whether written or spoken, can't capture. Buddhism emerged in ancient India as a philosophical and ethical tradition. It is deeply rooted in the teachings of Gautam Buddha and emphasizes compassion, non-violence, mindfulness and understanding the nature of human suffering. These ideas gradually shaped many aspects of Indian culture, including art and performance. Buddhism, which once flourished across South India has significantly influenced the artistic expression and aesthetic sensibilities of that region.

Furthermore, the philosophical ideals of detachment, compassion, and inner harmony resonate with the expressive vocabulary and pedagogical traditions of South Indian Classical Dance forms. Through an exploration of Bharatanatyam and Kuchipudi, this study seeks to understand how Buddhist ethical thoughts continue to inform aesthetic interpretation and artistic practice in contemporary performance contexts.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- To examine the presence and continuity of Buddhist ethical values within South Indian classical dance forms.
- To identify South Indian classical dance productions that have highlighted Buddhist ethical and aesthetic values.



HYPOTHESIS

This study is guided by the following hypothesis:

- South Indian classical dances have functioned as a vehicle for the silent transmission of Buddhist ethical sensibilities and values.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present study is based on the Descriptive Research methodology. The research primarily relies on secondary sources including books, research papers, journal articles, dance treatises and scholarly commentaries related to Buddhism. A few relevant case studies have also been incorporated to fulfil the objectives of the study.

For references, APA style has been used.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The following review of literature explores and presents major scholarly writings, research studies and critical commentaries relating dance especially classical dance and Buddhism.

A research paper titled “*Unravelling the Tapestry of Dance in Buddhist Religion and Literature*” by Dipa Sarker demonstrates that dance is not merely a performative art but a vital medium for the expression and reinforcement of identity within Buddhist traditions. Sarker argues that dance transcends aesthetic performance and becomes a form of lived religious practice that embodies Buddhist philosophy. (Sarker, 2024)

A practical illustration of the fusion of classical dance and Buddhist spirituality is documented by Srihari, who reports on a unique ballet presented at Ravindra Bharati by renowned Kathak dancer Shovana Narayan, her disciples, and Buddhist monks. The ballet produced by World Buddhist Culture Trust and supported by Department of Culture and language and Tourism of Telangana government depicted the inherent qualities of human being segregated into three sections —

- ‘Satvika’ or peaceful
- ‘Rajasa’ or dignified
- ‘Tamasa’ a bit self-aggrandisement

While the girls were dancing on the stage, the monks were seen moving on a raised platform chanting mantra. An interesting blend of dance and spiritual message. (Srihari, 2016)

A research paper titled, “*Buddhist Psychology Intersects with Dance Movement Therapy*” authored by Tripura Kashyap, Anubha Doshi and Karishma Arora, specifically reveals how the embodiment of concepts from Buddhism through movement can help in concretizing and embedding meditative practices in the mind–body continuum. (Kashyap, Doshi, & Arora, 2022)

Additionally, Naraphong Charassri and Dharakorn Chandnasaro, in their research “*The Dance from Concept of Trilaksana in Buddhism*,” examine the application of the Buddhist concept of *Trilaksana* (impermanence, suffering, and non-self) in artistic expression. They quote that “there are a lot of artists that apply the concept of *Trilaksana* in Buddhism art such as painting, sculpture, architecture. However, such permanent art cannot perfectly demonstrate the true meaning of

Trilaksana. Creativity through moving art can effectively elaborate Dhamma and differentiate art components.”They further emphasize that such creative expressions must align with cultural traditions to ensure authenticity, aesthetic appeal, and social relevance. (Charassri & Chandnasar)

The interrelationship between dance—particularly classical dance—and Buddhism has been explored by several scholars, emphasizing dance as both an artistic and spiritual medium. Existing literature highlights how movement functions not merely as performance but as a vehicle for religious expression, cultural preservation, and embodied spirituality. Collectively, these studies demonstrate that dance, particularly classical and movement-based forms, plays a vital role in interpreting and transmitting Buddhist philosophy.

BUDDHIST ETHICAL VALUES: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Buddhism builds an ethical system that is the relationship between precepts, concentration, and wisdom to lead to enlightenment and liberation, in which precepts have a fundamental role for liberation. Buddhist ethics is mainly in the Precepts, which include many standards and categories that are closely intertwined with the model of liberation. Buddhism has built a complete ethical system from perception, theory to practice and applied it to build a way of life - and it has indeed become a way of life in people's daily life. (Hong, 2022)



Fig no 1: The Five Moral Precepts in Buddhism

Many Buddhist songs carry and explain these ethical values. These compositions act as powerful tools that simplify and transmit the core moral principles of Buddhism to the society. “PanatipataVeramanisikkhapadamsamdiyami” in Pali language refers to the vow of abstaining from taking life and emphasizes the principle of ahimsa (non-violence) and compassion towards all living beings. Similarly, the remaining precepts advocate refraining from stealing, false speech, etc.

BUDDHIST FUNDAMENTAL TEACHINGS

Gautam Buddha is regarded as the founder of Buddhism. After attaining enlightenment, he dedicated his entire life to teaching the path towards liberation from suffering. His teachings are based on fundamental principles such as:

- The Four Noble Truths
- The Eightfold Path



- The concepts of Karma, compassion and non-violence.

The wheel is a very important symbol in Buddhism because it depicts the cycle of life and death. Buddhists believe that after beings die, they are reborn or reincarnated into a new form. It is believed that all positive thoughts and actions cause good *karma* and may direct one into being reborn in a higher form. The consequences of one's negative deeds, bad *karma*, may result in rebirth in a lower form. This endless cycle of rebirth, called reincarnation, reflects the impermanent nature of human existence. (Brown, 2002)

As part of the *Dharma*, Buddha taught about the Four Noble Truths. These are:

- I) Life is suffering.
- II) Suffering is caused by craving.
- III) Suffering can have an end.
- IV) There is a path which leads to the end of suffering.

Buddha's teachings gradually spread across Asia and later the world, shaping religion, philosophy, ethics, art and culture.

BUDDHIST ETHICAL VALUES REFLECTED IN DANCE PRACTICE

Classical dance today stands beyond entertainment. It has emerged as a "dharmic discipline" that is necessary for gaining spiritual insight and self-realization. Rigorous training, discipline of body and mind, humility before the Guru, devotion to the art, and ethical living form the foundation of the dancer's journey. Such an approach aligns closely with Buddhist ethics, which emphasize upon self-discipline, mindfulness, detachment from ego, and the cultivation of inner awareness.

In Buddhist philosophy, the body is often regarded as a tool for attaining higher consciousness. Similarly, South Indian Classical Dance traditions train the body not merely for aesthetic beauty but as a vehicle for expressing elevated state of consciousness. The mindful embodiment strongly parallels the Buddhist practice of meditation, where physical awareness ultimately leads to spiritual upliftment.

The survival of Buddhist ethical values within South Indian Classical Dance traditions can also be observed through the emphasis on compassion, non-violence, humility and emotional refinement. The cultivation of Karuna (compassion), serenity, patience, and emotional balance through dance highlights Buddhist moral philosophy.

CASE STUDIES

The following section explores various classical dance productions and performances (especially Bharatanatyam, Kuchipudi, Mohiniattam and Kathakali) that have in one or other way contributed by promoting and preserving Buddhist ideology and values.

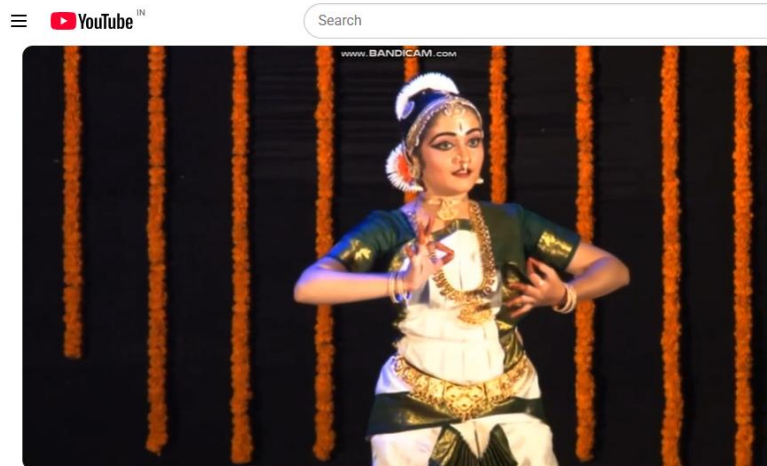
- “**BuddhamSaranam Gacchami**” is a 90 minutes Bharatanatyam Ballet which was premiered in 1995. It was produced and choreographed by Dr. Ananda Shankara Jayant, a famous Bharatanatyam exponent.

The ballet was set to Sanskrit verses and showed the life and philosophy of Lord Buddha. The ballet has been performed at various major festivals such as Pune festival, Konark Festival, SICA Nrityotsav Lumbini festival, Buddha Jayanti Celebrations in Burma and Laos. (Jayant)



Fig no.2: Ananda Shankara Jayant portraying the character of Buddha

- A 90-minutes Bharatanatyam production called “**Anweshana: The Search for Nalanda**” staged in Singapore in the year 2011 portrayed the theme of Buddhist iconography and traditional values. This production was supported by a two-year research project by the Nalanda University in India. Anweshana aimed to convey the Buddhist principles and teachings from Nalanda University, dating back 1,000 years, through the medium of Bharatanatyam.



Buddha Kauthuvam - Mrunal Thoolkar- Bharatanatvam - Pratibha Nritya Mandir

Fig no3: Mrunal Thoolkar, a disciple of Pratibha Nritya Mandir presenting Buddha Kauthuvam

- Pratibha Nritya Mandir, a premium Bharatanatyam dance institute based in Nagpur has created their own original composition called “**Buddha Kauthuvam**”. The lyrics of this Kauthuvam highlight the Five Buddhist Precepts, The Five Precepts are basic ethical

guidelines in Buddhism that encourage moral living and mindfulness. They involve committing to non-harm by refraining from killing, respecting others' property by not taking what is not given, maintaining responsible and respectful behaviour in relationships, practicing honesty and right speech, and avoiding intoxicants that cloud the mind and lead to carelessness. Together, these precepts support personal discipline, compassion, and clarity of mind.

- Famous Dance Guru Kanak Rele's dance production "**Gautam Buddha – The Enlightened One**" is a modern adaptation of Siddhartha's journey towards becoming Buddha. The influence of Mohiniattam was all too evident, with good dose of Bharatanatyam. Costumes were a delight as were the lights, though from front rows, one could see glaring yellow lights backlit from upper wings, making it uncomfortable for the eyes. (Khokar, 2011)



Fig no.4: "Gautam Buddha – The Enlightened One" premiered at Mumbai

- Meera Sreeraj's Bharatanatyam dance production titled '**Praphulla**' is based on Buddhist philosophy and also highlights the Panchatantra and Jataka tales, a journey of blossoming in myths, mind and movement. It was inspired by the wisdom of Buddha – how the Buddha's wisdom helped the minds of the common man to blossom or become praphulla. It portrayed how the mind gives rise to six root delusions (kleshas) and how awareness helps us rise above them. Meera acted as the preacher and a young dancer as the one who questions and then receives the wisdom. (Praphulla- Jataka and other tales of Buddha, 2025)
- Another exponent of Bharatanatyam, Dr. Siri Rama presented a full Margam on the theme of Buddha at Mysore Association, Bombay in 2006.
- **Tattvayātrā – The Search for Truth:** A Kuchipudi dance presentation choreographed and performed by Sravya Manasa Bhogireddy for Buddha Purnima at Buddhavanam, Telangana, focused on the life and wisdom of the Buddha.
- Dancer and scholar Methil Devika, along with her students, showcased "**Hridayasutra**," a performance that interprets Buddha's teachings on Nirvana via Mohiniyattam



CONCLUSION

Classical dance encourages Buddhist values by transforming moral lessons into tangible experiences—shaping the body, soothing the mind, and serving as a reminder for both dancers and viewers about compassion, mindfulness, and proper behaviour. The practise of dance shapes both the body and the consciousness of the performer, encouraging emotional refinement, mental concentration, and spiritual sensitivity.

South Indian classical dances especially Bharatnatyam, which developed mainly in Hindu temple traditions, many of their themes and practices align closely with Buddhist ethics. Buddhist ethical principles such as compassion, mindfulness, self-discipline, detachment from ego, inner harmony and right conduct find subtle yet meaningful expression within the framework of South Indian classical dance traditions. The survival of Buddhist ethical and aesthetic values is evident not only in themes and philosophy but also in the very process of dance training, performance and artistic experience. Through this continuity, dance remains a living spiritual practice that connects human expression with transcendental truth.

The study therefore establishes that Buddhist ethical and aesthetic principles continue to survive, evolve, and resonate within South Indian classical dance traditions, validating the hypothesis of the research and reaffirming the role of dance as a timeless medium of philosophical and spiritual expression.

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