

Telecon with Abraham Sussman Personal Growth and the Dances of Universal Peace

The following interview took place on July 9, 2012 between Abraham Sussman, an original mureed of Murshid Sam and a Senior Mentor of the DUP, and Hayat Donna Bain, who is a Dance leader and a former member of the DUPNA Board.

Hayat: Welcome everyone. I'm Hayat Donna Bain in Virginia. I live in the Richmond area. I'm a Dance Leader. I lead a circle in Arlington, Virginia, mostly co-lead and center the circle. I do some Dance Leading in the Richmond area. I'm also a Mureed in the Ruhaniat.

Abraham, I'm honored to say that he's one of my teachers. He's an original mureed of Murshid Sam, a Senior Mentor of the Dances of Universal Peace, and the Co-Chair of the Senior Leaders Ethics Council.

Abraham: I'd like for us to first to put our hearts and minds together and breath together to feel our unity across the span of time and space here. I'll say the invocation aloud to aim us into our practice tonight, but everyone can say it on the breath. The important thing here is that we're experiencing our unity through this practice.

Towards the One
The Perfection of Love, Harmony and Beauty
The only Being
United with all the Illuminated Souls
Who form the embodiment of the Master
The Spirit of Guidance

Hayat: It might be nice for you to say, since I know you have been giving this some thought, how the Dances of Universal Peace help with personal growth.

Abraham: I have been. The term personal growth is an interesting term. While we are persons and we are growing. There's an impersonal aspect of personal practice, there's some way in which we are cultivating *fana*, surrender, effacement, emptiness, as the Buddhists like to call it. I like so much that Murshid Sam's Zen teacher was Nyogen Senzaki. Nyogen means 'no such person'. There is built into our lineage a recognition that the personal often can be equated with the egotistical and the self important. In the Dances we're really very focused on letting go of the narcissism of self-importance and tuning to the feeling of the group, feeling through the divine, and through sacred phrases to the whole. The practice, it's personal growth in the sense that it's spiritual practice that lets us, helps us, and assists us in overcoming separation, overcoming the disconnection that's built into the structure of the ego. The sense of need, and longing, and grasping that is part of human personality. In the Dances, all of that often can quite gracefully evaporate as we experience our unity, we experience collective connection. We experience our selves in relationship to other people, and to more than the people in the circle, we're in relationship to the illuminated beings whose names we are invoking in the practice. We're in connection to the teachers in the various spiritual streams that flow through the dances. We're in living connection to the whole lineage of teachers who have nourished and given life to this practice. It's personal growth in the sense that it provides a foundation for connection and linking with other beings, including the beings in the circle that we're dancing with and that's a great practice. I'm always enthusiastic about the opportunity to shed their individuality and isolation as part of the practice of the Dances.

There are many, many other ways with which the practice is personal growth. I'll name some of them now, but then we'll jump to the questions. It's certainly growthful to call out the sacred names. It's growthful to give ourselves, give our breath, and give

our energy to the awakening of our connection to all the illuminated souls. It's personal growth to be in rhythm, to be in steady rhythm as the Dances can be, and to connect with all of humanity. The Dances can provide a foundation for this. These are spiritual practices but they're personal growth practices. We register often at the end of the evening, "Gee, I feel so good!" People often say, "This was a great gathering. I'm so glad I came." Often, I think what they're saying is, "I let go of all of my troubles that I was carrying all day with my worries about the world, and I experienced a moment of spiritual connection and unity with my brothers and sisters." That's a terrific experience. This is something that the Dances do often, especially when they're led by someone who's in tune with the power of the Dances as a spiritual practice. That will be my introductory comment.

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Hayat: That's great, thank you. You covered quite a bit. Someone asked a question about defining personal growth and how it manifests in the dance circle and the role of the Dance Leader. Do you have anything more to say about that specifically?

Abraham: The Dance Leader is on the one hand, one of the senior navigators of the Dance ship as we're dancing together, and at the same time the Dance leader is bringing all of his or her practice into his or her being in that moment, and so the capacity to hold the energy that the leader brings in is a very important factor in where the group journeys. If the leader is feeling very constricted, and very frightened, and very tense, that provides a certain kind of limitation on what kind of journey the group is going to take under that person's leadership. If the leader is feeling magnetic, and radiant, and expansive, and in touch with their own gratitude for

life, and they're just flowing forth in their own radiance, that provides a certain kind of opportunity for the whole group to journey because the leader is defining the parameters through his or her own being. One of the questions someone asked was, how can we educate the group around how the Dances can be a spiritual practice and personal growth? From my perspective the strongest education is by example, that the leader manifest and demonstrate the qualities that we're invoking, the qualities of loving, the qualities of peacefulness, and the qualities of clarity. This isn't something that we can will ourselves to: this is the function of a life of practice. So it is really incumbent upon all Dance Leaders to be in practice, to keep tuning yourself, keep refining yourself, keep developing yourself, and when you're leading, this is an opportunity to practice integrating and incorporating all the training that you've received in your whole life. You're representing your teachers, you're representing your elders, you're representing their teachers, and their teachers. When we are holding a circle, we're invoking the whole lineage stream. Murshid Sam is right in the room when we call him in and so are all of our teachers.

Hayat: Beautiful. Someone asked a very specific question about wanting to do a Zikr Dance, or something a little deeper during a Dance circle that might be two hours. How does one bring people into that experience in a deep way although they may not have any background in that kind of practice? So you have a suggestion about how to go about that.

Explanations about what we're doing and why we're doing it rarely add to the spiritual fire of the practice.

Abraham: Again, through your being, through the natural feature of that practice. If a leader is comfortable and at home in a deep practice that creates an opportunity for others to catch it. You know we often say, "The greatest aspects of the Dance can't be

taught, but they can be caught.” We catch them, hand to hand, heart to heart from each other. If a leader is in a deep space and wants to take the group into an deep, extended practice, the most important feature is that the leader and whoever is supporting the leader, other musicians, whatever are comfortable with the depth of that practice and others will come along. People sort themselves. I don’t think that there’s any explanation or going into the mind, in so many ways, confuses the Dance. The Dance is something that is caught energetically, heart to heart, and the more we try to explain what we’re doing, and try to get everybody to figure out what they’re doing, the more we go into the mind mesh, and the further we go from spiritual practice. I don’t actually think there’s a lot we can tell people. It’s good to say enough at the beginning of an evening, so people feel safe, people feel welcome, and people feel included. But explanations about what we’re doing and why we’re doing it rarely add to the spiritual fire of the practice. This is my opinion.

Hayat: Yes, I’ve experienced that myself. You said something a little while ago that made me think of this question. When leading do you ever experience a disconnect between what you personally want for the journey to be with the circle or the group, and what the group energy seems to be calling for and in said situations how do you honor the divine desire emerging through everyone present, including yourself?

Abraham: That’s a great question. Thank you whoever wrote that. It’s a very, very subtle question and I think it hits right at the heart of the challenge of being a Dance Leader. On the one hand we have to follow our own inspirations. We do have guidance, there’s a voice within us that is giving us direction and guidance and we have to respect that. At the same time we’re holding a post for the group, and with the group, and it’s true that the group has its own life and we best to pay attention to what’s in the room, and who’s in the room, and how do we work with the energies that are present

in the room. So it's a balance, I think, continuously between tuning into what is your own practice and paying attention to where the group is at and keeping in touch with the mood of the group. There are times when the group gets confused, collectively from a Leaders point of view. They may just go into a space that is really contradictory to the goals of the evening and its good to just lovingly invite them back into sacred space. If you're feeling like the group is distracted in some way, it's important to ring the note of our goal with the Dances, which is embedded in the invocation and we are about love, harmony and beauty. If things other than love, harmony and beauty show up in the room, we lovingly bring the focus of our attention back to love, harmony and beauty.

Hayat: Thank you. How do you strike a balance with the Dance Leader in terms of their authentic presence in the circle and being able to be open or not open about their personal growth process, or how they're feeling in the circle?

Abraham: That was a good question too, and every Dance Leader wrestles with that in some way or another. I feel like, as much as possible, when we take on the post of holding the circle, we let go of our own need to talk about ourselves, our own need to tell our story. There are times when telling our story is appropriate, and is inspired and creative in the moment. There's nothing wrong with our having an authentic personal voice but more often than not, my feeling is that it's a distraction from the practice. The main work of the Dance Leader is to create a container for practice so if some aspect of somebody's story promotes that, that's fine. I don't like to put out any rules, you should do this, or you shouldn't do that. I don't think that's helpful. There's a history of creative inspiration that's part of our lineage and its important to recognize that every leader works differently. There's no right way to lead. There's as many ways of leading as there are people leading. I'm giving my own personal opinions about what I'm comfortable with, but it's guided by the sense I have that there really is an incredible

opportunity available every time we gather to Dance. I like to see leaders recognize that opportunity and support the opportunity by doing the best we can to hold the greatest and fullest potential of the circle each evening. Talking about our selves may or may not contribute to that. For the most part, I find myself as a leader, saying less and less other than giving teachings. I find that there are teachings that come out of a Dance practice that are worth sharing, but that's not so much personal, or that's not talking about me and my life, I'm transmitting something that's alive in the room through the practice that we're doing.

Hayat: Very good. There's a question that I'm not completely clear on the exact meaning of the question, so I'll read it. We're all wounded and I've tried to be accepting of everyone as well as my own limitations, and at times I'm also confused about whether that attitude has served the Dances well. Is there a "goto list" that we as Dance Leaders can create that identifies issues that are important to address directly for the benefit of that Dance, like the use of alcohol at an event, for example, which I have ignored to keep the peace?

Abraham: I actually wrote the person and asked for further clarification around those questions. The questions as I understand it here is, what do I tolerate in terms of behaviors in the room, such as if somebody comes in intoxicated, is that tolerable? Do I welcome them into the circle or not? The question as it further got elaborated included the whole very complex and rich issue of, what are my responsibilities as a leader when I feel like there's someone in the circle who has been functioning in a predatory way sexually in the circle. How welcoming need I be to such a person and how do I manage that? Those are two examples of challenging behaviors that may enter the circle and what is the responsibility of the Dance Leader here.

In my hat as the ethics chair, the co-chair with Quan Yin for the

Leader's Guild, community issues have come before me where there's been some challenging situation, something is not clear and clean, and people have sought help addressing it. I've been engaged in quite a number of different communities addressing these issues. I've realized that there are two poles that have to both be reckoned with, on the one hand, there is the principle of welcoming to all, and that's deep in our Dances and it servers us to be open-hearted, compassionate and to see ourselves in everyone and every kind of behavior that shows up in the room. And at the same time, we have a responsibility for protection of the space. We are overseers of the space and if something is not right, it's our responsibility to deal with it in some way. Quan Yin once said something quite wonderful, "Dance Leaders don't lead Dances, we lead circles of people."

The people who show up for a Dance are all our brothers and sisters with their flaws, with their challenges, with their issues and we are responsible for integrating everyone in a way that leads to spiritual practice, leads to sacred practice. And at the same time we are paying attention to the different kind of interference that people bring. How do we address that? One way to address it is to shine our own light so brightly that there's no room for a darkening tone that others might bring into the room. But then sometimes we can't control this, we have limited control over who is coming, and why they're coming, and who they are and what kind of a day they've had. We're not responsible for their behavior but we are responsible for protecting the group. If somebody is very, very inebriated in a way that seems like they are unable to concentrate adequately, I would ask them to leave. I think I've once done that. And if somebody is coming into the room, and it's clear to me that they pose some danger in how they are approaching people in the circle, that's a responsibility, that something to address, and it can be addressed in a variety of ways. It can be addressed by talking consciously, openly about respect, and respect in the circle that we want people to have for each other. If it becomes a persistent

problem in the community, the community can call a council and think about it together and it's not on one person's head. For a community to gather and address a challenge collectively is often a consciousness raising event on it's own. That's a whole set of processies.

Grace Marie wrote a wonderful paper last year on hugging. It was very inspired and very sensitive and deep. The issue of sexuality in the circles is natural. We all fall in love endlessly, because we're all radiant when we're dancing. The energy is flowing and the loving feelings of the circle are a beautiful thing and it only becomes problematic when it gets squeezed into some kind of personal agenda that people may have after the Dance. How do we as a community acknowledge that, honor it, shepherd it towards open-heartedness, creating safe space for everyone to be there and not feel like they're being preyed upon. I'm going on and on about this subject because I actually think it's a good one for communities to think about. I think it's a common theme. I've heard it addressed in many, many communities and it's a good theme to talk about and try to be conscious about.

Hayat: And it relates to the personal growth of the leaders in the circle, having to decide how to deal with these things and then if you end up having to bring the whole circle into it, or some sort of council from the circle to decide how to be loving and compassionate and yet handle the issue appropriately.

Abraham: I do want to mention here the importance of our mentoring system. The fact is that every single leader who is leading a Dance has a Mentor. That should be some body who you can turn to and talk to and say, "Whew, this is a challenging situation in our circle," and mentors should be helping mentees reflect on these challenges. The mentoring process is not only about the Dances, but they're also about how do we in our role as leaders grow into the level of responsibility that are being called

for in the circles that we're in. So it's very much a spiritual growth process that mentors can help mentees think about and work with.

Hayat: I loved what you said earlier in your introductory comments about being in a steady rhythm and how that in it self promotes personal growth. It reminded me of someone's question, off the top of their head, they thought that the topic was psychology in the Dances, which is similar. They wrote that would like to hear about ways in which the Dances can address neurosis, emotional problems, personality disorders. How and why the Dances are helpful in these things. And the steady rhythm was what, just personally, it seemed like it related to that.

Abraham: Steady rhythm and the invocation of the sacred phrase. I'm a licensed clinical psychologist so I feel authorized to discard the dehumanizing language that is so common in diagnostic terminology. How we talk about our difficulties. I find most diagnostic terminology offensive and insulting to the human spirit. At the same time we are challenged, and we do have issues and we struggle with them. The Dances are good medicine for everyone without using a language of neurosis or pathology. At the heart of our human personality issues is isolation, and loneliness, and disconnection from the heart space of loving. This cuts across culture, it cuts across generation. This is a very deep feature of the human experience. The Dances are really beautiful medicine for bring people together, for feeling unity, for holding hands, for breathing, sharing breath, for sharing song together, for sharing movement, and feeling connected and feeling like we get outside the little box of feeling isolation which is at the heart of an enormous amount of our *nafs* and personal struggles is all about our isolation and disconnection and the Dances are beautiful medicine for isolation and disconnection. They really help us connect and feel our unity in the human race.

Hayat: Yes, definitely. I know that you and Halima work together

in circles and I was curious if you have any thoughts about couples and personal growth. When couples are together in the circle, it seems there is a lot of fertile ground there for personal growth.

Abraham: I must say very clearly here that it has been a phenomenal blessing in my life that I am married to a woman who is a wonderful Dance Leader who's very inspired through the Dances. We have a shared practice, so it's a great joy for me to support her, to play music, and to appreciate her in her grace as a leader. She's very, very deeply tuned to the Dances and they're really a central part of her life. We share that and that is rich for us in our relationship. We've been doing this for forty years together.

Hayat: Wow, that's a long time.

Abraham: It is a long time, and I'm quite clear that when we are tuning together in an evening it sets a tone of the group tuning. We're bringing all the practice that we have done together into an evening through our awareness, and we tend to check in a lot with each other in the course of an evening as to where we think the evening needs to go, what might be the next dance, and where are we going. It's a process that we share. We become a check in for each other in a sense, which is always a good thing to have a checkpoint, or someone monitoring your own inspirations. Sometimes we have a different perspective on what might be needed and we usually resolve it quickly and clearly. It's a practice. Marriage is a practice is quite a serious personal growth practice. Someone once said, "Marriage is a mechanism that grows human beings." You grow human beings from the kind of dialogue because it's relationship. You can't be completely isolated and disconnected and work towards a loving relationship. The relationship calls for compromise and communication. The Dances are like a marriage in a sense. It's not the same level of commitment because a group of people just shows up for two hours, but we are committed to being together for those two hours,

and we are accountable to each other and we affect each other. We influence each other and that's a reality. And if somebody is way on their own trip and ignoring the group, it affects the group and we have to work with them.

Hayat: Do you have any thoughts about musicians and personal growth in the circle because a lot of the thrust of the questions was about leaders or about generally being a participant in the circle, but I know I as a musician have experienced a great amount of personal growth through the musician side of things, almost as much as the leader side of things.

Abraham: There's no formula to the Dances. Every evening is different, the moon in a different place in the sky. Everything's different each time we get together. Not only is the leader called to pay attention spontaneously to what's being called for moment by moment, breath by breath each evening: but so are the musicians. There's nothing formulaic about what to play and why you play that way. It's a matter of feeling, and feeling where the group is. As a musician myself I find that every single moment is full of challenge and opportunity - I'm feeling group, I'm feeling myself, I'm feeling the melody, I'm feeling the mantra, I'm feeling the sacred phrase, and it's all integrating breath by breath, moment by moment. So to me that can be very growthful. It's very challenging. There's a lot of work involved, a lot of paying attention, a lot of presence. Presence is a term that I find myself using more and more. I find it expresses so much about what our spiritual work leads to. When someone is really present and alive in connection to other people, it tells me they've done a lot of work. They've learned how to clear out, they've learned how to open their eyes, open their heart, and feel their way into the room. Musicians need to feel their way into each moment that's happening in the Dance.

Hayat: It's another kind of letting to of personal agenda or any

kind of self-importance.

Abraham: Yes it is, sure. The questions were really good questions. People put a lot of care and thought in framing them. If people have anything to add to or any questions that come out of what I've been saying, I'd be happy to open it up.

The phone lines were then opened for questions.

James from Jackson, Wyoming: What popped into my mind was I feel a dilemma here in Jackson in that it doesn't seem like musicians are showing up. I was a second-string guitarist in Seattle where there's musicians coming out of the walls. Which is awesome, and here I'm a second-string guitarist being the musician for the circle?

Abraham: What's the question?

James: Maybe I should pray about it.

Abraham: Sure, a good thing to do. Keep talking about it within the community. If you feel like, "Gee, where are the musicians?" keep saying it, "We need musicians," and they will show. It also provides a great opportunity to you to push yourself from the second string to the first string.

James: No pun intended (laugh), thank you very much.

Hayat: There's a challenge to you! Do you have anything to add before we close?

Abraham: Yes, I want to put focus on what I would call transmission, and how the leader is stepping into a post that is both the unfolding of their own life, but also linking to the illuminated souls, to our teachers, to the elders of our sanga, to the elders of

whatever spiritual paths that we walk. There's an enormous opportunity when we invite others to come and do practice with us. Holding a Dance is just that, it's inviting other people to do a practice with us. We are transmitting all of the sum of what we've trained ourselves to develop in ourselves. It puts into perspective all our relation to practice, to receiving teaching, to receiving transmissions, and to recognize that we are in a chain of transmissions. It doesn't begin with us; it doesn't end with us. There have been illuminated beings since the beginning of time and there will be illumination after us. We are simply in the caravan. We are simply holding our post in the stream of spiritual transmission and that's a fine place to be. It's important to recognize that we are not alone as leaders. We have the support of all the people who do these practices together. There's a tremendous blessing stream that's rooting for us. They are rooting for us to serve the Dharma, to bring the best to the fore, to bring our hearts alive and awake to share, and to move each other and to touch each other that way. They are rooting for us. Our work is simply - show up, pay attention, breathe, be peaceful and open our hearts.

Sandra Davie: I'd like to ask one more question. I started dancing in the 70s but I never got to meet Murshid Sam and I was just wondering since we are talking about transmission. Could you just say something about what it felt like, what the spirit felt like to dance with him.

Abraham: Sure, that's a whole evening worth of opportunity but it's a wonderful question, thank you Sandra Davie. You had to understand the time and the place - I was in my early twenties, he was in his seventies. Most of the Sanga were in our twenties. He was this very, very high-energy, intense, focused being who was capable of extraordinary ecstasy, and sometimes when he whirled the whole room would light up. He would whirl and the room would light up. And he was also very practical, and very grounded,

and very attentive to every person who came in he registered. He was a person of extraordinary feeling who would feel what was in the room. It was overwhelming for me, I had read many books about spiritual teachers, I had an understanding that there such beings, but I had never met anyone who was really a God-realized person until I met Murshid Sam. When I met him it was overwhelming in a sense, and very challenging because he was so high energy, he was intense. It was like being around a sun or a star that was radiating very intensely. The most important lesson I learned being around him was surrender, and *fana*, and I learned to shut up, and listen, and feel, and take in because I knew that he had something to offer me. I was able to sit and take in. I caught something from him, just from being around him.

Hayat: Thank you so much. It's really beautiful. Is there a particular way in which you would like to close.

Abraham: Perhaps we could all, I'm resonating with the group of us who have been listening. You been a battery while I've been the one wagging my tongue. I feel you listening and it's helpful to me. Let's just take a few moments and experience our selves in community, feel our selves breathing into that unity... Breathing into the awaking heart that was never born and never dies. Amin. So be it. Thank you all for joining this call.

Hayat: Thank you so much Abraham for being with us.