Why I . . . practise south Indian classical dancing

Consultant anaesthetist Famila Alagarsamy talks to Kathy Oxtoby about why Bharatanatyam dancing strengthens her heart and soul

Kathy Oxtoby

When Famila Alagarsamy was looking at ways to relax, she was inspired by memories of her childhood in south India.

Aged six, she took up Bharatanatyam, an Indian form of classical dancing that combines intricate movements, emotions, and expressions. As she progressed through school, her ambition to become a doctor left little time for hobbies and she left her dancing lessons behind.

Six years ago, however, after graduating, moving to the UK to complete her registrar training, and taking up her current role as a consultant anaesthetist at Cambridge University Hospital, specialising in major trauma and major cancer surgery, she decided to take up Bharatanatyam again.

“I miss India and learning classical dance reconnects me to my country,” she says. “It strengthens my heart and soul.”

Bharatanatyam is a Hindu form of classical dance that originated in the temples of Tamil Nadu, southern India, in the 16th century. Performed to classical Indian music, the dance combines intricate hand and leg movements with nine facial expressions called the “navarasas,” such as laughter, bravery, fear, and surprise.

Some of the dances tell a story relating to the Hindu gods, she explains. “I’m currently learning a dance which involves Shiva, the god of destruction. When you dance his stories, you have to show anger on your face and with your hand and body movements.”

She describes the dances as like an artistic form of yoga. “It’s a very physical dance form, which involves flexibility, stamina, balance, and concentration. And its many physical benefits include improving coordination and core muscle strength,” she says.

She especially loves the colourful costumes, make-up, and jewellery required when performing. “You also put on red dye on your hands, and wear anklets with bells that ring when you dance.”

Alagarsamy and her fellow dance students perform regularly at community events, including her school’s annual dance day. While she doesn’t suffer from stage fright, she does experience an adrenaline rush, similar to work.

Whether you’re on stage or in an operating theatre, a little bit of stress is good for you, she says. “You don’t want to completely relax. As an anaesthetist you need to be focused and vigilant and I apply these same skills to my dancing.” Likewise, you need to be a good team player, she says.

She finds Bharatanatyam has enabled her to unwind and de-stress from work, while exercising and keeping fit. “After a busy day, practising Bharatanatyam helps me unwind, allowing me to come back to work feeling refreshed and focused.

“When you’re concentrating on your dance lessons it takes your mind off things. It’s almost like meditation as well as a full body workout,” she says.

“It’s exercising, which releases endorphins—the ‘happy hormones’ that are good for your mental health and wellbeing.”

She has recommended Bharatanatyam or other classical dancing to colleagues as a way of keeping fit rather than going to the gym “which can be a bit boring.

“There are so many advantages to classical dancing. You’re learning a new skill, meeting new people, connecting to music, getting a physical workout, and giving your brain a workout too. And above all it’s great fun.” She enjoys the satisfaction of learning and performing dances, she says. Her husband and children always attend, while she sends her twin sister in India videos of her dancing on stage.

Alagarsamy is hoping to refine her skills so she can perform a finale stage performance, called arangetrum. “If you’re really good and practise a lot, after about seven years it’s traditional to give a finale performance. One day I’m sure I’ll feel happy and confident to do it.”

How to make the change

- Visit dance school websites like narthaki.com to find a school near you
- Find a group of interested friends and colleagues so you can learn and practise together
- Practise consistently and be motivated to improve your skills
- Perform in community events—these can be rewarding experiences
- Dancing is therapeutic and you could use it as a therapy for other patient groups