

From Breath to Dance:

Music and Movement as Languages of Experience

in an American Sufi

Abstract:

This paper uses historical and comparative methods to discuss the work in the mysticism of sound and music of the American Sufi-Buddhist teacher Samuel L. Lewis of San Francisco (d. 1971). Lewis, an exponent of “experiential comparative religion” (Rawlinson 1997), is best known as the founder of the Dances of Universal Peace, a worldwide movement considered as a New Religious Movement (Webb 1995) and “hybrid Sufism” (Hermansen 2000). Lewis’s musical mysticism was influenced both by his Sufi teacher Hazrat Inayat Khan (d. 1927) and American Dance pioneer Ruth St. Denis (d. 1968). Influenced by Korzybski’s general semantics movement (1948), Lewis developed practices in music and movement as its own language of experience. He saw the states of exaltation (in Sufi terms *ahwal*) evoked by such practices as promoting a more fully human experience of consciousness, personal health and wellbeing and interreligious harmony. Includes recorded sound and video of Lewis.

This paper uses historical and comparative methods to discuss the work in the mysticism of sound and music of the American Sufi-Buddhist teacher Samuel L. Lewis (1896-1971) of San Francisco. As I noted in a paper for a previous joint session of the Mysticism and Islamic Mysticism Groups (2004, subsequently published 2008), Lewis has been variously categorized by scholars, often in contradictory ways. For instance, Andrew Rawlinson, considered Lewis, an exponent of “experiential comparative religion” (Rawlinson 1997), while Webb (1995) considered his work as a New Religious Movement, Godlas (2004) as “non-Islamic Sufism” and Hermansen as “hybrid Sufism” (Hermansen 2000).

Lewis is best known as the founder of the Dances of Universal Peace, an interspiritual movement that has subsequently spread around the world,

as well as the founder of a branch of the Chishtia tradition of Sufism currently called the Sufi Ruhaniat International in its organizational form.

As Rawlinson points out, the "comparative" part of Lewis's influence comes from his study of and accreditation in both Zen and Sufism over a 40 year period:

Not only was he recognized as a teacher by sheikhs in a number of Sufi orders (including the Chishti, the Naqshbandi and the Shadhili), he also practised Zen with Japanese and Korean roshis (and received Dharma Transmission from one of them), and later was a sort of disciple of Papa Ramdas, a well-known Hindu teacher (22).

While this multiple spiritual "nationality" made Lewis suspect in some quarters, he considered his work to be fully within the traditional mainstream of all these mystical traditions. As I discussed in my previous work (2008), Lewis used Alfred Korzybski's (1948) "general semantics" principles to radically deconstruct various received definitions of the traditions he studied along phenomenological lines, that is, based on the mystical experiences that the practices of the tradition promote in relation to the way that the traditions evolve over time in particular communities. Lewis added to these concepts his opinion that certain cultures had evolved words to stand for concepts that are not present in other cultures, but that relate to real experiences that can be compared by mystical practitioners, in what today would be called an inter-subjective way (for instance, see Reason and Rowan, 1981).

In his writing for various Buddhist journals, Lewis deconstructed traditional definitions of *buddha*, *dharma* and *sangha* to express what he felt to be their experiential emphasis. For Lewis, these and other Zen terms and rules (*vinaya*) did not express fixed states or categories, but were functional

and process-oriented, and needed to be "indexed" as such (in a general semantics sense).

In a similar way, Lewis considered various Islamic terms from their Arabic roots to emphasize their functional meaning, that is, in general semantics terms, from an "organism-as-a-whole-in-an-environment (external and internal) point of view" (see Korzybski, 1948: xx). To a friend in Pakistan, he writes:

The translation of *Rahman* and *Rahim* into other languages has resulted in the use of terms quite unrelated to each other, whereas it is obvious that the root *Rahm* is common to these two words and they must have some related function. I call them "the Compassionator" and "the Compassionating" without holding too fast to these words (Johnson, 1986: 315-316).

Lewis' emphasis on direct experience and his distrust of the shifting nature of words led him to often quote or paraphrase the saying of the classical Sufi Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, "Mysticism is based on experiences and not on premises."

["Dance to Glory" video excerpt 1 here]

In developing his own "language of experience," he began personally to use a combination of Indian, Japanese and Sufi practices to develop the sensory awareness of sound and music, as a more authentic way to participate in the sources of religious experience. Under the influence of his Zen training, Lewis aimed to bring participants into a more direct experience of their own humanity in the present. He used Sufi sound and music practice similarly, to take his students into a deeper experience of their everyday lives, rather than into other-worldly trance states. Combining Zen with Sufi ideas, he saw the states of exaltation (in Sufi terms *ahwal*) evoked by such practices as pointing toward a more fully human experience of consciousness:

Sufis repeat: "Ya Allah! In love, reverence and humility I surrender to Thee and Thee alone, and Thou dost fill me spiritually." The Sufis see the whole universe as teeming with every form of life. [Meditation] is to remove the ego, and this brings in the universal life. Many other schools will remove the ego and bring nothing in. So the false view of Nirvana equates it with the Sufic "*fana*," while the true Nirvana, the Nirvana of Lord Buddha, is the "*fana-fi-baqa*" of the Sufis, the removal of the false ego, as it is said in the Sufi Thoughts [of Hazrat Inayat Khan], so that the True may function in and with and through the personality (Lewis, 1978, "Commentary on Everyday Life Gathas of Hazrat Inayat Khan, Series III, p. 40).

Before considering Lewis's musical mysticism in more depth, useful context is provided by some brief background on his unusual life. Born in 1896 in San Francisco, Lewis was disowned by his family in his late teens for an over-avid interest in religion. His father, a secular Jew and senior executive of the Levi Strauss Company had wanted to install him in business. Instead, Lewis had studied theosophy, Eastern religions and the mystical side of Judaism. It was through the latter pursuit that he met a California teacher of Kaballah, Rabia Ada Martin, who was also an early student of the Indian Sufi musician and teacher Inayat Khan (1886-1927), who had come to live in Europe in 1910. At the same time, Lewis was also studying with the legendary Zen master Nyogen Senzaki (co-author, with Paul Reps, another student of both Inayat Khan and Senzaki, of the book *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones*, 2000). Lewis met Inayat Khan in 1923, during one of the latter's visits to San Francisco, and he initiated a meeting of Khan and Senzaki, which both mention in their autobiographical papers. According to Lewis, both the Sufi and Zen masters ignored efforts of their followers to make small talk:

The two men sat down at a table, looked into each other's eyes and both immediately entered into that *samadhi* which so many

lecturers tell us about but do not experience themselves (Lewis, 1986, p. 74).

After Inayat Khan's unexpected passing in 1927, Lewis continued to practice Sufism, although primarily on his own due to the splintering of Inayat Khan's movement after his death. According to Lewis, Khan has asked him to produce esoteric commentaries on the latter's written work and to help bring together the world of the mystic with that of the intellectuals and scientists. Over the next 20 years, Lewis also continued to study and practice Zen, as well as Bhakti Yoga with the Hindu Swami Papa Ram Das. In addition, he also studied sacred dance with American dance pioneer Ruth St. Denis (1879-1968), who had a school in Los Angeles that also included as students Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey and Charles Weidman). Under St. Denis' influence, Lewis produced an unpublished book ("Spiritual Dancing," 1939, hereafter SD) on the psychic and spiritual effects of movement and dance cross-culturally. This book would become a seed for his establishment of the Dances of Universal Peace nearly 30 years later.

After reconciling with his father in 1949, Lewis received a small allowance while in his 50's. As he had been working as a gardener to support himself, Lewis then pursued and completed a university degree in horticulture and set off on two trips to Japan, India, Pakistan and Egypt (1956 and 1961-62) to share his passion for organic farming techniques as well as to search for other practitioners of mysticism (Lewis, 1986). These journeys were pivotal in Lewis' life. Rejected as an eccentric at home, on his one-man citizen diplomacy trip, Lewis received many unexpected welcomes. He found that professors of agricultural colleges were under intense pressure to convert to modern Western farming methods, which were tied to unsustainable fertilizer

and seed sources. On his search for what he considered genuine mystics, Lewis also found scientists, scholars, government and professional people at all levels who were practitioners of Zen, Sufism, Vedanta, mystical Christianity and other traditions, but who had been overlooked by Western scholars such as Arthur Koestler, because they were living what appeared to be normal lives. During his trip to India in 1962, Lewis visited the tomb of Sheikh Selim Chishti in Fathepur Sikri near Agra, India and reported that he had a vision of a "Dance of Universal Peace," which would combine active mystical group practice with a focused concentration on world peace (Lewis, 1986, p. 329).

All of these strands of Lewis's life began to coalesce when, in the late 1960's in San Francisco, he developed a following among young people of the hippie generation, (Lewis 1986, pp. 311-325). His original students came to him as a Zen teacher and later adjusted to his increased emphasis on Sufi practices (Johnson 2006). Just before he died in 1971, when he had approximately 100 Sufi disciples, Lewis organized his work under the name *Islamia Ruhaniat Society*, a title given him by Pir from Dacca, East Pakistan (Maulana Abdul Ghafoor), who had appointed Lewis a representative of Chishti Sufism in the West in 1956.

In 1969, he reported that he began to receive visions of group dances with chanting, which he began to share with his Sufi students (mureeds) As one of his first students and later spiritual successor Moineddin Carl Jablonski reported:

Starting in the spring of 1969, Murshid began getting less and less sleep at night due to the increasing activity of his visionary consciousness. As Murshid put it: "Allah (God) keeps me up at night so I can receive these visions of new Dances." Often it would take two or three days before a Dance which Murshid had witnessed in vision

would filter down to the mental realm, to be later translated into written instruction (Jablonski 1990, p. 26).

According to Jablonski, the early Dances were in a simple "follow-the-leader" mode with participants chanting either "Allah, Allah" or "Om Sri Ram Jai Ram Jai Jai Ram":

In Murshid's own words, he gives the secret:

'No dance is a Spiritual Dance because it is called that; it does not mean a certain form or technique, nor a ritual. What must remain is the sacred phrase; this, the sacred phrase and not the form, is the foundation of development along this line.' (Jablonski 1990, p. 26)

[“Dance to Glory” video excerpt 2]

Lewis' dance practices seemed to be simple, folk circle dances with chanting. However, he emphasized their deeper side in various writings on music as spiritual practice, based on a somatic awareness of the heart and the use of breathing practices to clarify inner feeling. In a series of instructions on "Spiritual Training Through Music" (1978, hereafter STTM), he writes:

Spiritual training through music is not to give one a great voice, not to make you become an artist, nor singer, nor musician, although it may do any one or all of these things. The real purpose is that Allah express Himself fully through the human body, through your physical vehicle. Therefore, whether you take up singing or play an instrument or devote yourself to dancing, the first step is the same, to feel the divine HU within yourself (STTM, p.3)

Hearing or speaking the sound "hu" is part of the Sufi practice of *dhikr*, the repetition of the whole, or parts of the phrase, *La illaha illa 'llahu*. Lewis repeatedly emphasizes that the practitioner of Sufi spiritual music must begin with an inner meditation on hearing and feeling the sound 'hu' in order to

efface one's personal identity in that of the divine, reaching a state that the classical Sufis call *fana*:

Before one takes even the first lesson in music, Zikar [sic] practice is necessary to purify the body and Fikar [repetition of the phrase internally] also may be required to purify the mind. When one feels or hears the divine sound HU within or without their being, one is ready for the musical expression, but first it is necessary to feel HU or to hear that sound. Some hear it, but feeling it is more important for through love of sound, we come to God, through identity with sound, we become identical with God.... For musical training according to the Sufi method is impossible if one is self-conscious. Therefore the first exercise is to enable one to lose the self in the greater being of Allah. (STTM, p.3-4).

The next step, according to Lewis, was to intone the sound "HU" on a single note feeling it resonating near the heart. This is reminiscent of the practice of singing one note on the syllable "sa" in Indian classical vocal music (Mathieu, 1991, p. 38):

Resonance comes through the repetition of HU either spoken or blown or sung.... [O]nce the voice is placed in the heart, once the center of speech and feeling is located there, singing is most valuable for it enables God to speak through you. This is done through long practice in Zikar and by concentrating on the sound HU coming from the heart (STTM, p. 4).

Only after this stage is reached, does Lewis recommend beginning to use breathing practice in order to regulate "rhythm, power and tone production: "

Breath, however, is the means, not the source. Physical control only produces physical power; thought control supplies mental power and by it you can hold a note much longer and easier, besides its having a finer quality. So you can hold a note even longer by heart control...then the quality can become so fine it is can even be called angelic (STTM, p. 5).

Lewis distinguishes his idea of spiritual training through music, from Western vocal coaching, which emphasizes pitch and being "in tune":

The perfection of the note comes through control of breath and control of mind. Although one may not notice it, the jagged edges of a note come from the wrong mode of mind, or from a lack of clarity of thought due to incomplete concentration.... [I]n spiritual music the object is to make the mode of the music and the mode of the inner being the same. Consequently, not too much attention is paid to pitch at first, whether the note be high or low, flat or sharp, or even loud or soft. Before these things are learned, the sound must be properly produced in and from the heart (p. 9).

Lewis points out the larger implications of such vocal practice for understanding one's psychological and spiritual condition:

There is no better way than the use of music to determine whether you are at peace and in harmony with the world, for all things can be measured by the voice in the heart. The whole spiritual secret of raga is that the pitch comes from within, the selection of notes comes from within. When the body, mind, and heart are all attuned to the soul, which is God, one is a real *Kawwali* [sic], a hall of Divine Sound himself, wherein Allah can produce His supernal music through his human instrument and mediator (p. 6).

Inayat Khan expresses similar thoughts in various treatises on music, in which he emphasizes the relation between the quality of one's voice and the activity of one's mind and emotions, which are preparing the "weather" one will experience:

For those on the spiritual path, thinkers, students and meditative souls, it is of the greatest importance to know the condition of their spirit from time to time by consulting their voice. That is their barometer. From morning till evening one can see the weather—the weather created by oneself: whether it is warm or cold, or whether it is spring or winter. One's voice is that barometer that shows to us what is coming, because what will come is the reaction, the result of

what is created, and the voice is indicative of it (Khan, 1960, p. 119).

As a further preparation for danced movement, Lewis extended this approach to spiritual practice centred in an awareness of the heart into walking meditation. Unlike walking meditation found in Vipassana Buddhism or Naqshibandi Sufism, Lewis emphasized a variety of attunements, for instance, with alchemical elements, astrological planets, centers and with the *sifat-i-Allah*, or divine qualities of Allah expressed in the Sufi tradition by the *asma-ul-husna*, or "99 Beautiful Names of Allah." In his diaries, Lewis cites the influence of Ruth St. Denis on this direction in a letter to one of his Pakistani Sufi correspondents:

One began teaching spirituality through the *Walk*.... This method was blessed by the late Miss Ruth St. Denis, a very spiritual dancing teacher who knew how to receive inspiration from the very space itself....

By applying the divine qualities [*Sifat-i-Allah*] to humanity, one helps to remove the evils, the shortcomings, the impediments and all the grosser aspects of being. A sacred phrase is better than a chastisement....

When I told Muslims what I was doing, they said, "Muslims will not approve of this." I answered, "It is not a question of whether Muslims will approve of this, it is a question of "Does Allah approve of this."

The next phase seems to be coming--that these methods can be extended to deal with psychological problems (Lewis, 1986, pp. 336-337).

As an extension of heart-centred musical practice, Lewis hoped spiritual movement would also help ameliorate warlike psychological and cultural tendencies in the world:

The Goose-Step involves a maximum of Yang to practically lthe complete exclusion of Yin. Metaphysically, the Goose-Step and War

[sic] are one. The Goose-Step...makes use of force without stint or qualification. It involves destructive psychic as well as physical forces. To abolish war, we must abolish warlike movements (Lewis, SD, p 20).

Going further, Lewis hoped for what he called a "universal-spiritual-aesthetic revival" (Lewis, SD, p. 63):

We are here to complete our humanity, not to avoid it. Therefore we must hold before ourselves the idea of the holiness of humanity and the sacredness of the body. Institutions, themselves, forms and ideas are inferior to humanity, for humanity was created by God and these things were made by humanity. As humanity grows in understanding, in consideration and in compassion, spiritual art will unfold itself accordingly. Humanity's heart-awakening must come first.

In this idealistic vision, Lewis was following the influence of Ruth St. Denis, who wrote in 1933:

The dance of the future will no longer be concerned with meaningless dexterities of the body....Remembering that man is indeed the microcosm, the universe in miniature, the Divine Dance of the future should be able to convey with its slightest gestures some significance of the universe.... As we rise higher in the understanding of ourselves, the national and racial dissonances will be forgotten in the universal rhythms of Truth and Love. We shall sense our unity with all peoples who are moving to that exalted rhythm (Miller, 1997, p. 55).

With all this as a background, Lewis envisioned spiritual music and movement as a shared language of human experience, a sort of nonverbal Esperanto. This "language" did not depend on the various shifting meanings of words so criticized by his fellow general semanticists. He was particularly hard on organized religion in this regard. As he wrote to a Sufi friend:

As-salaam aleikum. We may keep a phrase as a motto or we may weave it into our lives. Religion has failed, because sacred words have

been turned into mottos, often in self-defense or otherwise and have not become the measurement of our beings (1986, p. 327).

As his work with Dances of Universal Peace developed in the last year of his life, Lewis added sacred phrases from Christian, Jewish and ancient Egyptian sources to those from Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam. Through sharing these methods in a popular way, in the form of group chanting with movement, Lewis hoped to help realize what Inayat Khan (1967) had called "the unity of religious ideals," an essence of the human spiritual impulse that was pre- or trans-verbal and conceptual. Lewis hoped that this would help increase understanding between people of different religious traditions and decrease intolerance. Towards the end of his life, he began to express his goal simply as "my peace theme: eat, dance and pray together." He wrote to a student, "Actually, although we seem to be in a world of song and dance, we are most concerned with peace on earth" (Morgan, 1999).

After Lewis' passing, the Dances continued to spread freely, using his own words, "both extentionally and intentionally." Despite his assertion that "we are not running a fun club, not running a dramatic show," and his emphasis on long, inner personal development as preparation, versions of his dances did sometimes develop along more superficial and sensationalist lines (for instance, in the case of the Rajneesh movement).

On the "intentional" side, development has proceeded along the lines he foresaw: use of the Walk and Dances of Universal Peace in psychological training, halfway houses and therapy, multicultural education, interfaith and interspiritual celebration. The Dances were also used in citizen diplomacy trips to the former USSR in the late 1980s and early 1990s, as well as in similar efforts in the Middle East. Along these lines, and others, a worldwide

network of practitioners of the Dances of Universal

(www.dancesofuniversalpeace.org), founded in 1982, attempts to further Lewis' vision of the potential of his dances and walking meditations.

Other influences of Lewis' work in these areas continue today. One of his students, the jazz musician and teacher William Allaudin Mathieu (1991, 2010), has written extensively on the deeper, spiritual and psychological dimensions of music. In addition, my own work in hermeneutics, particularly with an Aramaic approach to the words of Jesus (1990, 1999, 2005) with accompanying music and movement practices, owes much to the basic direction that Lewis set out.

In the final analysis, it remains to be seen whether Lewis' work will have the lasting influence on Western culture that he hoped. Certainly, the necessity for some influence is no less than when he wrote the following in 1940:

When mankind, terrorized by conflict and faced with the ruin of his civilization, when the power of wealth has dominated justice and the concept of fiction-money is leading to utter destruction; when the Holy Spirit, driven ever further away on its path of ascension has again reached zenith, to the undoing of so much near and dear to us—let us, in spite of what occurs before our eyes, invoke that same Divine Spirit through love and beauty, that we may restore order and balance to humanity.

When doctrines divide and isms turn man against man, without speech, without silence, let us demonstrate. Let these demonstrations manifest everywhere. Not what we think or say but what we do shall avail. May we therefore bear the torch of holiness and make of our bodies temples of sacred worship.

Now look with hearts and minds and eyes, on with the dance....
(Lewis, SD, p. 6)

References

The collected archives of the letters, papers, poems and diaries of Samuel L. Lewis are online at www.murshidsam.org. Papers with titles in quotes, for instance, "Spiritual Training Through Music" (STTM), "Spiritual Dancing" (SD) and "Commentary on Everyday Life Gathas of Hazrat Inayat Khan, Series III" are from the pdf versions found at that site, which are all copyrighted 1978, Sufi Ruhaniat International.

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