

Critical & Analytical Essays

From Sthāna to Samādhi: Reframing Nṛtta in the Nāṭyaśāstra through Yogic and Tantric Frameworks, with Extensions to South-east Asian Dance Traditions

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Edited By: Amritanath
Bhattacharya

Citation: Srivatsan Ashwini. "From Sthāna to Samādhi: Reframing Nṛtta in the Nāṭyaśāstra through Yogic and Tantric Frameworks, with Extensions to South-east Asian Dance Traditions " Poorvam International Journal of Creative Arts and Cultural Expressions, vol. 2, no. 1, June, 2026, pp. 61-100, Doi: 10.63752/pijcase.0201S03

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Published by Dhvani
Publication in Poorvam
International Journal of
Creative Arts and Cultural
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Abstract

This study proposes that there exists a deeper structural affinity between performance practice and philosophical inquiry than is commonly acknowledged. Grounded in the foundational insights of Piyal Bhattacharya on the metaphysics of embodiment in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, this paper builds upon his framework by drawing upon philosophical systems such as Ashtanga Yoga and Kashmir Shaivism. More specifically, it argues that the process of nṛtta may be understood as analogous to the yogic or tantric progression toward states such as Samprajñāta samādhi. Within this mapping, sthāna (along with sthiti) corresponds to dhāraṇā (focused concentration), karaṇa to dhyāna (meditative absorption), and aṅgaḥāra to samādhi (complete integration). In this context, the paper further argues that the performer employs sthānas as an initial step toward depersonalization—shifting from individual identity toward a structured, archetypal presence. This transformation is not merely aesthetic but contemplative, requiring both technical precision and a deeply internalized state of awareness. Through this lens, Abhinavagupta's engagement with the *Nāṭyaśāstra* can be seen as something that recognizes performance as a valid and potent pathway toward higher states of consciousness.

Keywords: Aṅgaḥāra; karaṇa; sthāna; metaphysics of movement; Nāṭyaśāstra

Introduction:

In his examination of the metaphysical foundations of embodiment in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, Piyaḥ Bhaṭṭachārya states:

The entire process of fathoming a mental state and then processing it first occurs in the citta-kāśa of the actors with supreme awareness, and keeping the bodily action ‘extra-daily’ in the outer space (bhūta-kāśa) necessitates the presence of a perennially observing self. This ever-observing self is incurred from the ideation of ātmā that brings forth the layer of cidā-kāśa. Thus, we can see that Bharata's dynamics of nāṭya is founded on a layered ideation of space and metaphysical wisdom of movement rather than just bodily action and/or interaction with other bodies on the stage space. (30)

Bhaṭṭachārya's proposition—that sthānas, cārīs, and karaṇas are not mere movements but rather function as psychophysical embodiments of cosmic principles leading to an elevated sense of being—forms the foundation of the questions explored in this paper.

This study also emerges from years of embodied engagement with karaṇas and aṅga-hāras. For a long time, the author held the conviction that a thorough physical understanding of the karaṇa would unlock the essence of dance articulated in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*. The author's approach was highly technical and largely karaṇa-centric. At a crucial point in this journey, Bhaṭṭachārya redirected the author's attention away from karaṇa and aṅga-hāra toward sthāna, insisting that it held the key to the questions being pursued. This intervention proved transformative. What follows in this paper is, in many ways, an extension of that guidance.

Through sustained experimentation in practice, sthāna gradually revealed itself not merely as a bodily position but as both a mental and physical ground—an essential canvas without which entry into dance is impossible. While the transformations within the body-mind complex were partially experienced on the dance floor, the metaphysical mechanics underlying the process of nṛtta remained difficult to articulate. The structural relationships between sthāna, cārī, nṛtta-hasta, karaṇa, aṅga-hāra, maṇḍala, and

piṇḍibandha as well as their true purpose had yet to be fully conceptualized and articulated.

A critical insight emerged through a deeper engagement with Aṣṭāṅga Yoga and Kashmir Śaivism. This inquiry led to the possibility that sthāna may be understood as analogous to dhāraṇā ; the sequential execution of karaṇas may be viewed as a form of dhyāna; and the sustained performance of an aṅgahāra may culminate in an experience analogous to samprajñāta samādhi. While these correspondences are exploratory rather than definitive, they provide a productive framework through which to examine the psychophysical dynamics of movement described in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*.

Section 1 examines the concepts of dhāraṇā , dhyāna, and samādhi as understood within Patañjali's Aṣṭāṅga Yoga and Kashmir Śaivism. It also introduces the concept of upāya in Kashmir Śaiva thought. Although each of these topics constitutes a vast field of inquiry, the discussion focuses on those aspects most relevant to the present study.

Section 2 investigates key concepts from the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, namely sthāna, sthiti, gati, cārī, karaṇa, and aṅgahāra.

Section 3 proposes a conceptual mapping between sthāna and dhāraṇā , karaṇa and dhyāna, and aṅgahāra and samādhi, examining the implications of these parallels for understanding the metaphysics of movement.

Finally, Section 4 offers examples of dance traditions in Southeast Asia where meditation still continues to be the main technique of the dance form and samādhi the highest goal. In doing so, this section highlights areas for future research.

Section 1:

Dhāraṇā, dhyāna, and samādhi in Yoga

Yama, niyama, āsana, prāṇāyāma, pratyāhāra, dhāraṇā , dhyāna, and samādhi constitute the eight limbs (Aṣṭāṅga) of Patañjali's Yoga system as seen in the Sūtra below:

यमनियमासनप्राणायामप्रत्याहारधारणाध्यानसमाधयोऽष्टाङ्गानि ॥¹ (Patañjali, *Yoga Sūtra* 2.29)

Further, Yoga is defined as the Sūtra below.

योगश्चित्तवृत्तिनिरोधः ॥² (Patañjali, *Yoga Sūtra* 1.2)

From this Sūtra it is understood that Yoga is the cessation of mental modifications which highlight the purpose of Yoga where the body is used purely as a tool to condition the mind³. For the purposes of this paper, attention will be restricted to the final three limbs of the aṣṭāṅga system—dhāraṇā, dhyāna, and samādhi—also known as Samyama⁴, as they are most relevant to the present inquiry.

In the Yoga tradition, dhāraṇā is defined as:

देशबन्धश्चित्तस्य धारणा ॥⁵ (Patañjali, *Yoga Sūtra* 3.1)

Dhāraṇā is the binding of the mind to a particular place or locus⁶. The mind ordinarily shifts continuously from one object to another; dhāraṇā interrupts this movement by fixing attention upon a single point⁷. This idea will later prove central to the concept of sthāna. Initially, such fixation requires effort, as attention must be repeatedly redirected. Gradually, however, the effort diminishes and awareness begins to flow continuously toward the object. This continuity is described as dhyāna⁸.

तत्र प्रत्ययैकतानता ध्यानम् ॥⁹ (Patañjali, *Yoga Sūtra* 3.2)

The distinction between dhāraṇā and dhyāna is therefore one of continuity: what begins as deliberate fixation matures into an

¹ Patañjali. *Pātañjalayogadarśana*. With the Vyāsabhāṣya and the Yogasiddhi Hindi commentary of Suresh Chandra Shrivastava, 2nd ed., Chaukhamba Surbharati Prakashan, 1988. 265

² Patañjali, *Pātañjalayogadarśana*, 9

³ Patañjali, *Pātañjalayogadarśana*, 9

⁴ *Ibid.*, 324

⁵ *Ibid.*, 320

⁶ *Ibid.*, 320

⁷ *Ibid.*, 320

⁸ *Ibid.*, 322

⁹ *Ibid.*, 322

effortless flow of attention. This concept will later be employed in analyzing the sequential execution of karaṇas.

तदेवार्थमात्रनिर्भासं स्वरूपशून्यमिव समाधिः ॥¹⁰ (Patañjali, *Yoga Sūtra* 3.3)

According to *Pātañjalayogadarśana*, as dhyāna deepens, the distinction between observer and observed begins to dissolve. The object alone shines forth, while awareness of the meditator recedes. In other words, the cognition that ‘I am meditating on this object’ fades. This state is termed samādhī¹¹. Thus, dhāraṇā is not merely a preliminary stage but the beginning of a progressive transformation in cognition that culminates in meditative absorption.

Classical Yoga recognizes two broad forms of samādhī: Samprajñāta and Asamprajñāta. Asamprajñāta samādhī implies a state where there is a complete lack of both gross and subtle thoughts¹². This is not relevant to our present study because dancing would be impossible in a pure state of thoughtlessness. Therefore, this study focuses exclusively on Samprajñāta samādhī, a state of deep absorption where only subtle thoughts exist while gross thoughts have fully dissolved¹³.

वितर्कविचारानन्दास्मितारूपानुगमात् सम्प्रज्ञातः ॥¹⁴ (Patañjali, *Yoga Sūtra* 1.17)

According to *Pātañjalayogadarśana*, Sūtra 1.17 states that Samprajñāta samādhī unfolds through four progressively subtler stages. Vitarka denotes reasoning and focused inquiry, wherein the mind engages with a gross object through analysis and reflection. Vicāra represents a more refined contemplation directed toward subtler aspects of the object¹⁵. Ānanda refers to the experience of inner bliss that arises as the mind becomes increasingly tranquil and concentrated¹⁶. Finally, Asmitā is the subtle awareness of pure

¹⁰ Patañjali, *Pātañjalayogadarśana*, 322

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 322

¹² *Ibid.*, 324

¹³ Patañjali, *Pātañjalayogadarśana*, 324

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 62

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 63

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 63

“I-am-ness” that remains after grosser mental activities have subsided.¹⁷ Together, these stages describe a movement from conceptual engagement toward progressively subtler modes of meditative absorption. The paper will later explore how each of these stages may be discerned within the sustained execution of an aṅgahāra.

Dhāraṇā in Kashmir Śaivism:

At the outset, it is important to note that the term Kashmir Śaivism functions as an umbrella term for several interconnected philosophical traditions. The literature of the Trika system of Kashmir falls under Agama Śāstra, Spanda Śāstra and Pratyabhijña Śāstra¹⁸. A comprehensive examination of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* through the lens of each of these systems would be beyond the scope of the present study. Rather, this paper draws selectively from these literary works in an attempt to illuminate the metaphysical processes experienced by the actor-dancer. Abhinavagupta’s commentary on the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, *Abhinavabhāratī* serves as the primary motivation for undertaking an inquiry along these lines.

A second caveat is equally important. Many of the concepts discussed within Kashmir Śaivism are best understood through lived practice under the guidance of a competent guru and, traditionally, through initiation (dīkṣā)¹⁹. Consequently, there are limitations to deriving theoretical models from Śaiva texts and applying them directly to a practical discipline such as nāṭya. The interpretations proposed here should therefore be viewed as exploratory. A practitioner who has undergone dīkṣā within a Śaiva lineage would be in a better position to confirm, refine, or challenge the conclusions advanced in this paper. The author is not directly aware of a study along these lines and hope that this will serve as a starting point toward an inquiry that is more practical in nature.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 63

¹⁸ Singh, Jaideva. *Shiva Sūtras: The Yoga of Supreme Identity*. Motilal Banarsidass, 1979, p. 15.

¹⁹ Abhinavagupta. *Tantrasāra* of Abhinavagupta. Translated with introduction and notes by H. N. Chakravarty, edited by Boris Marjanovic, preface by Swami Chetanananda, Rudra Press, 2012. p. 33

Finally, although both Patañjali's Yoga and Kashmir Śaivism employ the language of Yoga, their objectives differ significantly. As discussed earlier, Patañjali's system seeks the cessation of mental modifications as a means to liberation (mokṣa). Kashmir Śaivism, by contrast, emphasizes pratyabhijñā—the recognition of one's essential identity with Śiva as central to the idea of mokṣa as seen in the Sutra below²⁰.

मोक्षो हि नाम नैवान्यः स्वरूपप्रथनं हि सः।²¹

स्वरूपं चात्मनः संविन्नान्यत्तत्र तु याः पुनः॥१५५॥

(Abhinavagupta, *Tantrāloka* 1.155)

The question then arises as to how self-recognition can be achieved. The answer to this is beautifully encapsulated in the opening verse (maṅgalācaraṇa) of Abhinavagupta's *Gītārthasaṅgraha*:

य एव विततस्फुरद्द्विविधभावचक्रात्मकः
परस्परविभेदवान्विषयतामुपागच्छति ।
यदेकमयभावनावशादेत्यभेदान्वयम्
स शम्भुरशिवापहो जयति बोधभासां निधिः ॥²²

That Śiva—who, in the process of manifestation, unfolds into diverse forms and becomes the multitude of objects experienced as mutually distinct; and who, through one-pointed contemplation, returns once again to the state beyond differentiation—that Śambhu, destroyer of inauspiciousness and repository of illuminating consciousness, is ever victorious. (Abhinavagupta, *Gītārtha Saṅgraha*, 1.0)

This verse succinctly expresses a central Śaiva insight: One-pointed awareness is a crucial means of self-recognition.

²⁰ Singh, Jaideva. *Shiva Sūtras: The Yoga of Supreme Identity*. Motilal Banarsidass, 1979, p. 30.

²¹ Singh, Jaideva. *Shiva Sūtras: The Yoga of Supreme Identity*, p. 30.

²² Abhinavagupta. *Abhinavagupta's Commentary on the Bhagavad Gita: Gītārtha Saṅgraha*. Translated by Boris Marjanovic, Indica Books, 2004. p.25

Whereas Patañjali presents an eightfold path (aṣṭāṅga yoga), Kashmir Śaivism describes a sixfold system known as ṣaḍaṅga yoga. (Grönbold 3-9) As with the previous discussion, the present study focuses only on the final three limbs—dhāraṇā, dhyāna, and samādhi—which are common to both systems but are understood differently due to their differing philosophical goals.

Within the Śaiva framework, dhāraṇā is not merely a technique of concentration but the beginning of the dissolution of subject-object duality²³. A common example that stems from a dhāraṇā mentioned in the *Vijñāna bhairava tantra*²⁴ illustrates this process: if one contemplates an object such as a pot with sustained attention, one eventually ceases to cognize it merely as an external object. The object's individuality recedes, while the essence or "pot-ness" (ghaṭatva) becomes the dominant experience. What began as an objective perception gradually becomes a subjective realization.²⁵

In Chapter 5 of *Tantrasāra*, Abhinavagupta explains the dissolution of subject-object duality. H. N. Chakravarty in his translation and notes of the *Tantrasāra* writes:

In the beginning, one remains steadily established in one's own innate consciousness; then by repose in the object (prameye viśramya), one fills the knowable. Then he quickly dissolves the distinctions of subjectivity and objectivity, and takes rest. (84)

In addition, Ananda Coomaraswamy provides various instances²⁶ in his essay the 'Hindu view of Art' where he discusses the important role of art as yoga in Indian speculative thought. He observes that a work of art is inwardly completed before its external execution, echoing the idea that artistic creation arises

²³ Abhinavagupta. *Tantrasāra* of Abhinavagupta. Translated with introduction and notes by H. N. Chakravarty, edited by Boris Marjanovic, preface by Swami Chetanananda, Rudra Press, 2012. 84

²⁴ Singh, Jaideva. *Vijñānabhairava, or Divine Consciousness: A Treasury of 112 Types of Yoga*. Motilal Banarsidass, 1979.

²⁵ Lakshmanjoo, Swami. *Vijñāna Bhairava: The Manual for Self Realization*. See commentary on Sutra 62.

²⁶ Coomaraswamy in his essay 'Hindu view of Art' states the instance where Śaṅkarācārya cites the arrow-maker as a classical example of one-pointed concentration: though wholly absorbed in his work, he retains full awareness and control, illustrating a state akin to yogic attention. Coomaraswamy, Ananda K. *The Dance of Śiva: Fourteen Indian Essays*. Sunwise Turn, 1918. p. 21

from contemplative vision and sustained awareness. In Kashmir Śaivism, this transformation is understood through the concept of *māṭṛkā*, the principle that structures ordinary cognition. Jaideva Singh explains:

The *māṭṛkā* becomes the basis of all limited knowledge. *Māṭṛkā* means unknown, unrealized mother. So long as the mystery of *māṭṛkā* is not realized, she is a source of bondage or limitation. When her mystery is realized, she becomes the source of liberation. (172) ²⁷

Abhinavagupta similarly discusses the notions of *mamakāra* and *ahaṅkāra* in the *Gītārthasaṅgraha*, both of which arise through the operation of *māṭṛkā*:

‘ममामी’ इत्यादिः ममकारः, ‘अहमुदारोऽहं तेजस्वी अहं सहनः’ इत्यादिरहङ्कारः । एतो यस्य न स्तः ।²⁸

‘*Mamakāra* is the feeling of possession, expressed through notions such as "this belongs to me." *Ahaṅkāra* is the sense of selfhood expressed through ideas such as "I am generous," "I am powerful," or "I am forgiving." One who is free from both possessiveness and egoic identification is described as *nirmama* and *nirahaṅkāra*.’ (265)

Thus, *dhāraṇā* may be understood as a means of reducing the activity of *māṭṛkā* by stabilizing awareness and weakening habitual distinctions between self and object. To facilitate this process, Kashmir Śaivism prescribes several *upāyas* (means of realization). We begin with *āṇavopāya*, considered to be the lowest path of all. As Swami Lakshmanjoo explains, *āṇavopāya* employs

²⁷ Jaideva Singh in his book on the Siva Sutras writes : “... as ascertained in *Malini-vijaya*, the Divine *Paravak* expands, having recourse to the forms of *iccha* (will) *jñana* (knowledge) and *kriyā* (action); assuming the forms of vowel and consonant, group and the letters pertaining to the groups, Siva, Sakti, Mahesi and other deities, she becomes *matrka* in the form of letters from 'a' to 'ksa'. In all the experients, she brings about, on the occasion of knowledge with thought-constructs and knowledge without thought-constructs, the application of gross and subtle words by means of inner awareness. By means of the deities presiding over the groups and the letters, denoted by those groups, she exhibits in various ways wonder, joy, fear, attraction, aversion etc., and by concealing the un-limited independent nature of consciousness, she brings about limited, dependent embodiment.” Singh, Jaideva. *Shiva Sūtras: The Yoga of Supreme Identity*. Motilal Banarsidass, 1979, p.172

²⁸ Abhinavagupta. *Abhinavagupta's Commentary on the Bhagavad Gita: Gītārtha Saṅgraha*. Translated, with introduction and notes, by Boris Marjanovic, Indica Books, 2004. p.265

external support or actions (kriyā) to stabilize attention upon a particular locus.

Āṇavopāya is defined as that upāya where mystical entry takes place through concentration on parts of the body (sthāna-prakalpanā), contemplation (dhyāna), recitation (varṇa), support of the breath (uccāra), and mantras. It is also called kriyopāya, the path of action. (xxxii)

The next stage is śāktopāya:

In śāktopāya, the aspirant achieves absorption in God-consciousness by concentrating on the Supreme Being as found in the junction between any two successive thoughts or any two successive actions. (xxxv)

A central practice within śāktopāya is awareness of transitional moments—the gap between experiences. Examples include the interval between inhalation and exhalation, between two thoughts, or between successive actions. As Swami Lakshman Joo further explains:

"Madhyam dhyātvā: concentrate on that center, and while concentrating on that center, be established in that center . . . and in making yourself established in that center, the reality of God consciousness is revealed." (xxxvi)

The *Vijñāna Bhairava Tantra*, a foundational text of Kashmir Śaivism, presents 112 dhāraṇās. These contemplative practices are generally understood as belonging to āṇavopāya, śāktopāya, or sām̐bhavopāya (the latter lying beyond the scope of this study). A recurring theme throughout many of these practices is the injunction to focus awareness on the center (madhya). As will become evident later, this notion of centering provides an important key for understanding the experiential dynamics of karaṇas and āṅgahāras.

Section 2

In this section, we shift our attention to several key terms employed by Bharata in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* and elaborated upon by Abhinavagupta. A deeper understanding of these concepts is necessary before attempting to map dhāraṇā, dhyāna, and samādhi onto the execution of an āṅgahāra. Here, the author would like to highlight for the reader Bhattacharya's paper on "The Metaphysics of 'Embodiment' in Bharata's System of Nāṭya, for a deeper understanding of some of these concepts."²⁹

Karaṇa:

Bharata defines karaṇa in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* as:

हस्तपादसमायोगो नृत्तस्य करणं भवेत् ॥³⁰ (4.30)

At a superficial level, this definition appears to describe a coordination of the upper and lower limbs. However, Abhinavagupta's commentary reveals that a karaṇa is not merely an aggregate of movements; it is a single, unified kriyā strongly suggested by the word Samāyoga (union). The term used to describe it is 'Ekā kriyā'.³¹

This understanding is central to the present study. A karaṇa is constituted by what may be termed its karaṇa-mātrkāś: cārīs, nṛtta-hastas, and sthānas³². While cārīs govern the movements of the lower body and nṛtta-hastas those of the upper body, sthāna provides the foundational basis upon which these movements unfold.

Sthiti, gati, and sthāna:

Abhinavagupta comments:

²⁹ Bhattacharya, Piya. "The Metaphysics of 'Embodiment' in Bharata's System of Nāṭya: The Dynamics of 'Extra-Daily.'" pp. 9–31.

³⁰ Bharata Muni. *Nāṭyaśāstra of Bharatamuni: With the Commentary Abhinavabhāratī by Abhinavaguptācārya*. Vol. 1, edited by M. Ramakrishna Kavi, revised and critically edited by K. S. Ramaswami Sastri, 2nd ed., Oriental Institute, 1956. Chapter 4.

³¹ Bharata Muni. *Nāṭyaśāstra of Bharatamuni: With the Commentary Abhinavabhāratī by Abhinavaguptācārya*. Chapter 4.

³² *Ibid.*, Chapter 4

तेन गतिस्थितिसंमिलिते करणमित्यनन्त्यम् ।³³

Therefore, because movement (gati) and position (sthiti) are combined in it, it is called a karaṇa.

This commentary describes the karaṇa as arising from the conjunction of gati and sthiti. To understand this formulation more fully, however, we must first examine another important term: sthāna.

A common understanding of sthāna is that it refers to a bodily position assumed by the actor (naṭa) before initiating movement. While useful as a preliminary description, this interpretation can be limiting. For many years, the author understood sthāna solely as a physical posture from which a karaṇa or other movement begins. Owing to the guidance from Bhattacharya and a closer examination of the terms sthāna and sthiti, however, suggested a more nuanced interpretation.

Both terms are derived from the verbal root √स्था (sthā), "to stand", "to fix the mind on" or "to remain established,"³⁴ yet they carry distinct meanings. sthāna refers primarily to a place, position, or locus, whereas sthiti denotes a state, condition, or mode of being established.

³³ The term 'sthiti' has been translated as 'a fixed position' while gati as 'motion' by scholars in the past. Dr. Subrahmanyam in the *Common dance codes of India and Indonesia*, equates sthiti to sthāna and gati to cārī within the execution of a karaṇa. This paper takes a slightly different approach in saying that sthiti is a reference to mental stability which is sustained through the movement and is therefore executed simultaneously with gati whereas sthāna is more indicative of a location and placement of the body which is lost once gati unfolds. Subrahmanyam, Padma. *karaṇas: Common Dance Codes of India and Indonesia. Vol. I: A Dancer's Perspective*. Nrithyodaya, 2022. p.88

³⁴ Monier-Williams, Monier. *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary: Etymologically and Philologically Arranged with Special Reference to Cognate Indo-European Languages*. New ed., greatly enlarged and improved, Motilal Banarsidass, 1986.

Table 1: Sthāna and Sthiti

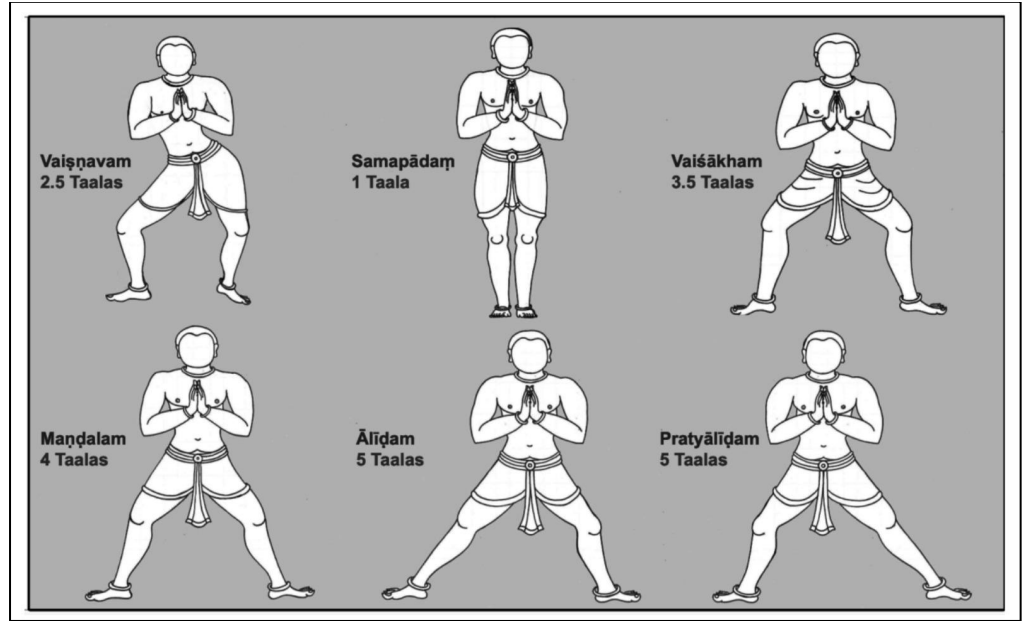
Term	Sanskrit	Derivational Suffix	Primary Meaning
Sthāna	स्थान	ल्युट् (lyut) → -ana	Place, position, location; act of standing. Intentionally standing ³⁵
Sthiti	स्थिति	क्तिन् (ktin) → -ti	State, condition, existence; stability, continuity ³⁶

Viewed through this lens, sthāna is more than a bodily posture. It is a locus in which body and mind are situated. When a dancer assumes a sthāna, she is not merely arranging the body in space; she is simultaneously placing and orienting the mind. Sthiti, by contrast, points less to location and more to a state of steadiness or stability. While it may manifest outwardly as physical stillness, its deeper significance lies in mental stability.

This distinction invites a reconsideration of the relationship between stillness and movement. If sthiti is understood primarily as a condition of mental steadiness, then movement does not negate it. Rather, gati unfolds within sthiti. Sthiti is a more permanent condition whereas sthāna dissolves once gati begins. In this sense, sthāna may be understood as a state that contains within itself the potentiality of movement while sthiti is a more permanent state that remains undissolved through gati.

³⁵ Monier-Williams, Monier. *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*

³⁶ *Ibid.*,



PC: Sreeja Krishnan

Figure 1: Six male Sthānas in Nāṭyaśāstra

The six male sthānas described in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* are illustrated below. The measurements presented in the illustration tally with the measurements described in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*.

Aṅgahāra

Śārṅgadeva, in the *Śaṅgītaratnākara*, defines the term aṅgahāra as follows:

एवं विशिष्टमङ्गानां हरणमङ्गहार इति सनिरुक्तिकं लक्षणम् । निरुक्त्यन्तरं दर्शयति – यद्वेति । हरस्यायं हार इति प्रयोगविशेषणम् । सोऽपि प्रयोगोऽङ्गैर्निर्वर्तित इत्यङ्गैर्हरोऽङ्गहार इत्यर्थः ॥³⁷
-Śārṅgadeva, *Śaṅgītaratnākara*, Chapter 7

The term aṅgahāra literally means a “garland of limbs” (aṅga + hāra). In practice, it refers to a prescribed sequence of karaṇas arranged in a particular order, as described in the fourth chapter of

³⁷ Śārṅgadeva. *Śaṅgītaratnākara* of Śārṅgadeva with Two Commentaries. Vol. 4, edited by S. Subrahmanya Shastri, general editor Alain Daniélou, The Adyar Library and Research Centre, 1953.

the *Nāṭyaśāstra*³⁸. Here, the metaphor of a garland is significant. Just as flowers may be strung together in different ways to form a garland, Karanas are strung together to form an angahara. Equally important are the points of transition between karaṇas. These transitional joints function much like the knots that bind a garland together and play a crucial role in shaping the overall structure and continuity of the movement sequence. To understand the nature of aṅgahāra more fully, it is necessary to first examine Bharata's concept of the nṛtta mātrkā.

Nṛtta mātrkā

द्वे नृत्यकरणे चैव भवतो नृत्यमात्रिका ।
द्वाभ्यां त्रिभिश्चतुर्भिर्वाप्यङ्गहारस्तु मातृभिः ॥ ३१ ॥

त्रिभिः कलापकं चैव चतुर्भिः शण्डकं भवेत् ।
पञ्चैव करणानि स्युः सङ्घातक इति स्मृतः ॥ ३२ ॥

षड्भिर्वा सप्तभिर्वापि अष्टभिर्नवभिस्तथा ।
करणैरिह संयुक्ताः अङ्गहाराः प्रकीर्तिताः ॥ ३३ ॥³⁹

-Bharatamuni, *Nāṭyaśāstra*, 4.31–4.33

According to Bharata, when two distinct karaṇas unite, they give birth to what is called a nṛtta mātrkā. When three karaṇas unite, they give birth to a kalāpakam; four unite to form a Śaṇḍakam; while five karaṇas unite to form a Saṅghātakam. Only the execution of 6, 7, or 8 karaṇas in succession qualifies as an aṅgahāra.

The term Mātrkā, as seen earlier within the Kashmir Śaivite tradition, is the "unknown mother." nṛtta mātrkā signifies the birth of nṛtta when two karaṇas harmoniously merge⁴⁰. This fusion serves as the generative force, or utpādaka, of the aṅgahāra.

³⁸ Bharata Muni. *Nāṭyaśāstra* of Bharatamuni: With the Commentary *Abhinavabhāratī* by Abhinavaguptācārya. Vol. 1, edited by M. Ramakrishna Kavi, revised and critically edited by K. S. Ramaswami Sastri, 2nd ed., Oriental Institute, 1956. Chapter 4.

³⁹ Bharata Muni. *Nāṭyaśāstra* of Bharatamuni: With the Commentary *Abhinavabhāratī* by Abhinavaguptācārya. Vol. 1, edited by M. Ramakrishna Kavi, revised and critically edited by K. S. Ramaswami Sastri, 2nd ed., Oriental Institute, 1956. Chapter 4.

⁴⁰ Bharata Muni. *Nāṭyaśāstra* of Bharatamuni: With the Commentary *Abhinavabhāratī* by Abhinavaguptācārya. Vol. 1, Chapter 4.

In the table below, the etymologies reveal an important conceptual progression. Kalāpaka denotes a cluster or bundle, while Śaṇḍaka suggests a grouping of elements. Saṅghātaka, however, implies something more than a collection. Derived from the notion of joining and integration, it indicates the formation of a unified composite from multiple constituent parts. Five karaṇas no longer remain merely juxtaposed; they begin to function as an integrated whole. Sequences consisting of three, four, or five karaṇas remain within the categories of Kalāpaka, Śaṇḍaka, and Saṅghātaka respectively. Only when the sequence extends beyond these preliminary formations does it assume the status of an aṅgahāra. This distinction becomes central to a later argument in the present study.

Table 2: Etymology of the terms Kalāpaka, Śaṇḍaka and Saṅghātaka

Term	Root Component s	Formation	Literal Meaning	Alternate meanings
Kalāpaka (कलापक)	Kalāpa = bundle, cluster, collection	Kalāpa + -ka	“That which is a bundle”	kalāpaka — a band, bundle, string of pearls, or grouped arrangement. ⁴¹
Śaṇḍaka (शण्डक)	Śaṇḍa	Śaṇḍa + -ka	Traditionally, a grouped formation	śaṇḍa — a group of trees, plants, wood, or thicket. ⁴²
Saṅghātaka (सङ्घातक)	sam (together) + √ghaṭ (to join)	Saṅghāta + -ka	“That which is joined together”	Related to ghaṭana — connection, union, formation of a constituent whole; saṅghāta denotes an aggregate or integrated composite. ⁴³

⁴¹ Monier-Williams, Monier. *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary: Etymologically and Philologically Arranged with Special Reference to Cognate Indo-European Languages*. New ed., greatly enlarged and improved, Motilal Banarsidass, 1986.

⁴² Monier-Williams, Monier. *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*

⁴³ *Ibid.*

Next, we look at the following passage from Abhinavagupta's commentary *Abhinavabharati* on the concept of *nṛtta māṭṛkā*:

करणद्वयप्रयोगेण च विनिवृत्तनृत्ताभिमानो नास्ति ।
ततः परं तु नृत्यतीत्यभिमानात्करणद्वयं नृत्तमातृकेत्युक्तम् ।

-Abhinavagupta, *Abhinavabharati*

Abhinavagupta explains that when two *karaṇas* are brought together, the dancer begins to experience the awareness, “I am dancing” (*nṛtyatīty abhimāna*). This marks the emergence of a subtle sense of agency or self-identification within the act of dance. It is precisely this arising of the “I”-sense (*aham-bhāva*) that leads to the designation of the pair of *karaṇas* as a *nṛtta māṭṛkā*. This relationship between movement, the emergence of the sense of self, and the generative function of *Māṭṛkā* will become important later in this paper when mapping the progression from *aṅgahāra* to *samādhi*.

The purpose of *aṅgahāra* in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*

While individual *karaṇas* belong to the domain of *nṛtta*, *aṅgahāras* are composed from *nṛtta māṭṛkās* and occupy a distinct ritual function within the *Pūrvaraṅga*, the ceremonial performance that precedes the dramatic presentation.

Bharata states: “*pūrvaraṅge prayoktavyān dr̥ṣṭādr̥ṣṭaphalān api*”⁴⁴ - Bharatamuni, *Nāṭyaśāstra*, Chapter 4. This states that in the *Pūrvaraṅga*, those rites that yield both visible and invisible fruits should be performed.

Similarly, Kallinātha, in his commentary *Saṅgīta-Kalanidhi*, explains:

⁴⁴ Bharata Muni. *Nāṭyaśāstra* of Bharatamuni: With the Commentary *Abhinavabhāratī* by Abhinavaguptācārya. Vol. 1, Chapter 4.

अदृष्टं फलं तु देवताप्रीतिजनकत्वेनापूर्वसाध्यं लोकान्तरसुखम् ।
तदुभयमप्येतैः सिध्यतीत्युक्तं दृष्टादृष्टफलानपीति ॥⁴⁵

The invisible fruit (adr̥ṣṭa-phala) is the happiness experienced in another realm (lokāntara-sukha), brought about through the accumulation of merit (apūrvā) generated by pleasing the deities. Thus, both visible and invisible fruits are accomplished through these rites.

-Kallinātha, *Saṅgīta-Kalanidhi*

The aṅgahāra, therefore, is not merely an aesthetic arrangement of movement. It is embedded within a ritual framework and is intended to generate effects that extend beyond the immediate performance context.

Abhinavagupta further deepens this understanding in his commentary:

...अङ्गानां देशान्तरं प्रापणप्रकारीऽङ्गहारः । हरस्य चायं हारः प्रयोगः ।
अङ्गनिर्दिष्टो हारोऽङ्गहारः । यदुक्तिः— “महेश्वरस्य चरितं य इदम् इति ।

He offers several complementary explanations of the term aṅgahāra. At the technical level, it denotes the process by which the limbs are moved from one position to another. Etymologically, it is a hāra or sequence constituted by the limbs. At a deeper symbolic level, however, he associates it with Hara (Śiva), describing it as an embodiment of the activity of Maheśvara. This interpretation is reinforced by the statement⁴⁶: “महेश्वरस्य चरितं य इदम्” which translates to, “This is the activity of Maheśvara.” The implication is profound. The aṅgahāra is not simply a dance sequence but a ritual enactment that participates in a larger cosmological framework. Its purpose extends beyond artistic expression toward the realization of adr̥ṣṭa-phala and the embodiment of divine activity.

⁴⁵ Sārṅgadeva. Saṅgītaratnākara of Sārṅgadeva with Two Commentaries. Vol. 4, edited by S. Subrahmanya Shastri, general editor Alain Daniélou, The Adyar Library and Research Centre, 1953.

⁴⁶ Bharata Muni. *Nāṭyaśāstra* of Bharatamuni: With the Commentary *Abhinavabhāratī* by Abhinavaguptācārya. Chapter 4

Abhinavagupta strengthens this interpretation further when he notes:

“अन्ये तु योगात्समाधेरप्ययं भगवतः प्रीतये इति व्याचक्षते”⁴⁷. This observation is particularly significant for the present study. The above statement translates to, “Other paramparas explain that this is performed for the pleasure of the Lord through yoga and samādhi.” It establishes an explicit connection between aṅgahāra, yoga, and samādhi, suggesting that the movement sequence was once practiced by some paramparas not merely as choreography but as a contemplative and transformative practice. This connection forms the basis for the mapping of aṅgahāra to samādhi developed later in Section 3.

Section 3

In this section, the author will attempt to demonstrate why sthāna is analogous to dhāraṇā, karaṇa to dhyāna, and aṅgahāra to samādhi, using the various references presented in Sections 1 and 2.

Sthāna, sthiti, and gati as dhāraṇā

If sthāna is to be understood as analogous to dhāraṇā, it becomes necessary to examine more closely what exactly is being “held” in a sthāna. It cannot be reduced to a mere bodily position. Rather, it must be understood as a precise alignment of body, space, and attention.

The *Nāṭyaśāstra* itself does not present sthānas as arbitrary positions. They are highly structured configurations, each defined through specific measurements, expansions, and orientations of the body. As Bhattacharya points out⁴⁸ sthāna is the first stage in which the actor begins to embody rūpa through the expansion of

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, Chapter 4

⁴⁸ Bhattacharya, Piya. "The Metaphysics of 'Embodiment' in Bharata's System of Nāṭya: The Dynamics of 'Extra-Daily.'" *Poorvam International Journal of Creative Arts and Cultural Expressions*, vol. 1, no. 2, Dec. 2025, pp. 9–31. DOI: 10.63752/pijcace.0102W01.

space. The actor's body, which already possesses a familiar and habitual form, is reorganized in order to take on another form—one that is not part of everyday experience which he terms 'extra-daily'.

In order to make the body extra-daily, an extreme degree of concentration is required. The dancer's attention is therefore directed toward different parts of the body and toward very specific ways of holding it. This may be understood as parallel to the practice of *sthāna-kalpanā*, which forms part of *āṇavopāya*⁴⁹, as discussed earlier.

However, it is important to note that concentration on the body alone is not sufficient. The *sthānas* are not arbitrary. Each *sthāna* has a particular impact upon the mind. To understand this more deeply, it is useful to look beyond the *Nāṭyaśāstra* and into related śāstric traditions such as *Śilpa Śāstra* and the *Vāstusūtra Upaniṣad*. These traditions are concerned with form, proportion, and the geometry of embodiment. They offer a framework through which we can better understand why *sthāna* is constructed in the way that it is.

The *Vāstusūtra Upaniṣad* makes a striking observation⁵⁰:

तेजांशि सरलरेखाः — Light expresses itself through straight lines.

तिर्यग्रेखा मरुत् रूपा — Air manifests through oblique or diagonal lines.

These statements suggest that different orientations of form correspond to different energetic qualities. A straight, vertical line carries a different energy from a diagonal one. When this idea is

⁴⁹ It is important here to note that *sthāna Kalpana* emphasizes concentrating certain parts of the body. "In Kashmir Shaivism, there are three main places for concentration: between the eyebrows, the pit of the throat, and the heart. In the higher, more refined practice of *sthāna prakalpanā*, the aspirant must see the vastness of this universe represented in the span of a single breath. Swamiji explains that, in this higher form of *āṇavopāya*, the aspirant must discover where each aspect of reality is found in the span of one breath". While holding a particular *sthāna* in the performance of *angahara*, focus typically has to be placed simultaneously in different parts of the body. While this does not directly fit the technical definition of *sthāna Kalpana* given by Swami Lakshmanjoo, it certainly involves a great amount of focus on one's own body. Lakshmanjoo, Swami. *Vijñāna Bhairava: The Manual for Self Realization*. Edited by John Hughes, 2nd ed., Lakshmanjoo Academy, 2015.

⁵⁰ Boner, Alice, Sadasiva Rath Sarma, and Bettina Bäumer. *Vāstusūtra Upaniṣad: The Essence of Form in Sacred Art*. Motilal Banarsidass, 1996.

applied to the body, it becomes clear that alignment is not merely static and aesthetic—it is energetic and psychological.⁵¹

Each *sthāna*, therefore, may be understood as a geometric–energetic configuration. The manner in which the body expands in space—whether along vertical, horizontal, or diagonal axes—directly influences the quality of energy being embodied. This, in turn, affects the mental state of the performer.

For instance, in *samapāda*, where the body is held in near equilibrium, the expansion of space is minimal and symmetrical. This produces a sense of balance and neutrality. As the space expands further in *vaiṣṇava*, *vaiśākha*, and *maṇḍala* *sthānas*, the body begins to occupy more area and engage more horizontal space. This creates a shift in energy. The body becomes more dynamic and more charged. The emotional possibilities expand correspondingly. *Bhāvas* such as *vīra*, *adbhuta*, and even *bībhatsa* begin to find appropriate expressions within these expanded configurations.

By the time we reach *ālīḍha* and *pratyālīḍha*, the body has reached its maximum expansion. The stance becomes asymmetrical, directional, and forceful. The lines of the body strongly emphasize diagonals, often associated with attack and projection. It is therefore not surprising that these *sthānas* are used for expressions of *vīra* and *raudra*.

What emerges from this analysis is a clear correlation between the form of the *sthāna*, the amount of space occupied by the body, the direction of expansion, and the resulting emotional state. This relationship is not symbolic in a loose sense; it is structural. The body does not merely represent emotion—it generates the conditions in which a particular state of mind becomes possible.

This has direct implications for the actor. In the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, the actor is not expected to rely on personal emotion or memory; such reliance is, in fact, discouraged. Instead, the actor is trained to enter into the appropriate state through embodied means. *Sthāna*

⁵¹ Bhattacharya, Piyal. "The Metaphysics of 'Embodiment' in Bharata's System of Nāṭya: The Dynamics of 'Extra-Daily.'" *Poorvam International Journal of Creative Arts and Cultural Expressions*, vol. 1, no. 2, Dec. 2025, pp. 9–31. DOI: 10.63752/pijcace.0102W01.

becomes the first and most crucial tool in this process. When an actor assumes a *sthāna*, he is not expressing an already existing emotion; rather, he is creating the conditions for that emotion to arise. The alignment of the body shapes the alignment of the mind, and the geometry of the form reorganizes attention.

This understanding becomes even more nuanced when we consider the role of *cārīs* in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*. *Cārīs* are described as lower-body movements involving the thighs, shanks, and feet, typically with one leg moving at a time⁵². At a functional level, they are associated with ‘*gamana*’—the displacement of the body in space. This definition, however, can create the impression that a *cārī* is merely locomotion. A closer examination of the term reveals a deeper significance.

The word *cārī* is derived from the root *car* (to move)⁵³, but in this context it is understood through the application of a *ñijanta-pratyaya*, which introduces the sense of causation. This suggests that a *cārī* is not simply movement, but movement that is brought about—movement that is produced by an underlying cause.

This raises an important question: what is the producer of a *cārī*? In performance, one might identify this as *vibhāva*, the stimulus that gives rise to action. This allows us to consider another possibility—that the *sthāna* itself functions as the *vibhāva* for the *cārī*.

Sthāna, in this sense, is not merely a position but a condition of potential. It represents the will to move held in a state of containment. It is movement in its latent form. According to Coomaraswamy, artistic creation begins with an inner vision already realized in the mind, while the physical act of creation serves as its external manifestation⁵⁴.

⁵² Bharata Muni. *Nāṭyaśāstra* of Bharatamuni: With the Commentary *Abhinavabhāratī* by Abhinavaguptācārya. edited by M. Ramakrishna Kavi, revised and critically edited by K. S. Ramaswami Sastri, 2nd ed., Oriental Institute, 1956. Chapter 11.1

⁵³ Monier-Williams, Monier. *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary: Etymologically and Philologically Arranged with Special Reference to Cognate Indo-European Languages*. New ed., greatly enlarged and improved, Motilal Banarsidass, 1986.

⁵⁴ Coomaraswamy, Ananda K. *The Dance of Śiva: Fourteen Indian Essays*. Sunwise Turn, 1918. p.23

This idea finds a strong parallel in the Śaiva conception of icchā, jñāna, and kriyā śaktis mentioned in the Siva Sūtras⁵⁵. Within a properly assumed sthāna, one may identify icchā śakti—the will to move or create; jñāna śakti—the knowledge of how that movement must unfold within a trained body; and kriyā śakti—the actual capacity for that movement to manifest.

This idea is also reflected in the very origin of Nāṭya as described in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*. In the first chapter, when Brahmā is approached for the creation of a form of audio-visual expression, he does not respond immediately with action. Instead, he enters into a deep state of meditation before bringing forth the Nāṭya Veda⁵⁶. This moment is significant. It suggests that creation itself—whether of a text, a form, or a movement—must arise from a state of concentrated awareness. Action does not precede stillness; it emerges from it.

In the context of nṛtta, this concentrated state is established through sthāna. What appears outwardly as a physical stance is, in fact, an internal condition of focus. In yogic terms, this corresponds to dhāraṇā. Just as dhāraṇā provides the necessary ground from which meditation can arise, sthāna provides the ground from which movement and a particular emotion unfolds.

From this point, a deeper process begins—that of depersonalization. In everyday life, the body is deeply tied to identity. One stands, walks, and moves in habitual ways that reinforce a sense of “I.” The *Nāṭyaśāstra* deliberately disrupts this. By requiring the body to enter into unfamiliar geometries, it weakens habitual patterns of identity.

Bhattacharya describes this as the movement from the “daily” to the “extra-daily.” The actor no longer moves as himself, but begins to inhabit forms that are structured, codified, and archetypal. This is not imitation; it is transformation. The actor does not pretend to be a character. Instead, through sthāna, hasta, and karaṇa, he

⁵⁵ Singh, Jaideva. *Shiva Sūtras: The Yoga of Supreme Identity*. Motilal Banarsidass, 1979.

⁵⁶ Bharata Muni. *Nāṭyaśāstra*, Sutra 1.13

gradually replaces his own bodily identity with another structured form. The personal “I” is not expressed—it is set aside.

In this sense, *sthāna* becomes a means of becoming. This brings us back to the central argument of the paper. If *sthāna* functions as *dhāraṇā*, then it is through *sthāna* that the actor first learns to hold attention, reorganize identity, and enter into a different mode of being. From this point onward, *karaṇa* and *aṅgaḥāra* do not merely extend movement—they deepen absorption.

The journey from *sthāna* to *samādhi*, therefore, is not merely metaphorical. It is experienced physically and mentally within the very structure of *nṛtta* itself.

Karaṇa as ekā-kriyā: Movement as dhyāna

If *sthāna* may be understood as analogous to *dhāraṇā*, then the *karaṇa* can be understood as analogous to *dhyāna*. This transition is crucial because it marks a shift from holding attention to sustaining it. Viewed through the lens of Patañjali Yoga, it is sustained focus that involves repeatedly redirecting one's wavering attention back to the chosen object.

Returning to the definition of *karaṇa* discussed earlier, we can understand that a *karaṇa* is not a collection of movements; it is a single, integrated *kriyā*. Each *karaṇa* must be understood as an *ekā-kriyā*, a singular action that unfolds as one continuous unit. This is not simply a theoretical assertion but emerges from Abhinavagupta's own elaboration, where he describes *kriyā* as a movement from one state to another, passing through a process of transition without fragmentation⁵⁷.

This has an important implication. If a *karaṇa* were to consist of multiple independent actions, then each of those actions would introduce a potential break. Wherever there is a break, there is the possibility of a loss of attention. In contrast, when a *karaṇa* is

⁵⁷ Abhinavagupta defines a *kriya* as follows ‘*Pūrvakṣetrasamyogatyāgena samuchitakṣetrāntaraprāptiparyantatayā- Ekā kriyā tatkarāṇamityarthaḥ | Uttarasamyogāntam hi sarvatra karma | Sa cāpyabhilaṣitottarasamyoga*’. In essence, an *Ekā kriyā* involves relinquishing a specific position (*Pūrvā Kṣetra*) to attain a desired position (*Samucita Kṣetra*) in order to reach a final position (*Uttara Saṃyoga*). Bharata Muni. *Nāṭya Śāstra with the Commentary Abhinavabhāratī* by Abhinavaguptācārya. Edited by K. Krishnamoorthy, Gaekwad Oriental Series, no. 36, Oriental Institute, 1992. p.90

executed as a single, continuous kriyā, it naturally supports a state of uninterrupted focus. In this sense, the structure of the karaṇa itself provides the necessary conditions for dhyāna.

This becomes even clearer when we consider the role of ‘athruti’, a term emphasized by Abhinavagupta⁵⁸. Athruti literally means “unbroken” or “without interruption.” He uses this term to describe the quality that distinguishes a karaṇa from an ordinary, laukika movement. A karaṇa must not be “cut” or segmented; it must flow seamlessly. The absence of breaks is not merely an aesthetic requirement—it is what allows the movement to carry a certain grace, or vilāsa⁵⁹, and more importantly, what allows the mind to remain absorbed.

This is where the connection to dhyāna becomes very direct. Just as dhyāna is defined by the uninterrupted flow of attention, a karaṇa is defined by the uninterrupted flow of movement. The two are structurally parallel. The body sustains continuity in space, while the mind sustains continuity in awareness. When these two align, movement itself begins to take on a contemplative quality.

However, this raises a practical question: how is such continuity achieved, especially when a karaṇa often involves multiple components such as cārīs and nṛtta hastas? This continuity is made possible through the use of rechakas—the movements of the kaṭi, pāda, hasta, and grīvā. Rechakas function as connectors. They do not merely decorate the movement; they fuse its components into a single, flowing action.⁶⁰ For example, in the case of the Svastika-recita karaṇa⁶¹, the movement appears, at first glance, to involve multiple nṛtta hastas—recita, āviddhavaktrau, svastika,

⁵⁸ Bharata Muni. *Nāṭya Śāstra with the Commentary Abhinavabhāratī by Abhinavaguptācārya*. Chapter 4

⁵⁹ Abhinavagupta starts his commentary on a Karana in this manner: ‘kriyā karaṇam | kasya kriyā | nṛtyasya | gātrāṇām hastopalakṣitasya vilāsakṣepasya’. This translates to “A karaṇa is an action belonging to dance.. It is the graceful projection of the limbs”. The term ‘Vilasa’ specifically emphasizes aesthetic beauty through extraordinary grace. *Ibid.*, Chapter 4.

⁶⁰ Dr. Subrahmanyam discusses the role of the rechakas at length. Subrahmanyam, Padma. *karaṇas: Common Dance Codes of India and Indonesia. Vol. II: A Dancer's Perspective*. Nrithyodaya, 2022.

⁶¹ The ‘svastika recita’ karana is defined by Bharata as ‘स्वस्तिकौ रेचिताविद्धौ विश्लिष्टौ कटिसंश्रितौ ॥ यत्र तत्करणं ज्ञेयं बुधैः स्वस्तिकरेचितम् ॥’. However, it is Abhinavagupta’s commentary that sheds light on the exact nṛtta hastas to be used in this karana which includes the 6 nṛtta hastas listed. *Nāṭya Shastra of Bharatamuni, with commentary Abhinavabhāratī by Abhinavaguptacharya*, Chapter 4

viprakīrṇa, pakṣavāñcita, and pakṣapradhyotaka. However, these are not to be executed as separate actions. We know this because of this definition of a karaṇa as a single kriyā given by Abhinavagupta. Hence, they must be fused into a single kriyā through a carefully structured use of rechakas, following the chronological order prescribed in the śāstra. The karaṇa, therefore, is not a sequence but a synthesis.

This idea is critical for understanding how karaṇas function within an aṅgahāra. An aṅgahāra is a combination of karaṇas, and the transitions between karaṇas are where the greatest risk of fragmentation arises. If each karaṇa itself is not internally unified, then the transition between karaṇas will inevitably introduce breaks. However, when each karaṇa is performed as an ekā-kriyā, the gap between two karaṇas becomes perceptible and can be consciously managed.

It is precisely here that rechakas play a second, equally important role. While they fuse the internal components of a karaṇa, they also serve as bridges between karaṇas. They allow the dancer to sustain attention even during the transition, preventing the mind from slipping out of its focused state. In this sense, the rechaka becomes the locus of continuity—not merely of movement, but of awareness. The rechakas also serve the dual purpose of adding vilāsa, or extraordinary grace, to the movements.

At this point, it is worth drawing attention to the fact that in the *Tantrasāra*, the word karaṇa is used with reference to an arrangement of body parts in the context of āṇavopāya⁶². While one cannot conclusively state that this refers to the exact same karaṇas discussed in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, the parallel is compelling. Further evidence connecting the two would add a great deal of clarity to this topic.

Returning to the larger framework of this paper, we can now observe a clear progression. Sthāna establishes the ground of attention and corresponds to dhāraṇā . Karaṇa sustains that

⁶² Abhinavagupta. *Tantrasāra* of Abhinavagupta. Translated with introduction and notes by H. N. Chakravarty, edited by Boris Marjanovic, preface by Swami Chetanananda, Rudra Press, 2012. p.80

attention through continuous movement and therefore corresponds to dhyāna. The uninterrupted nature of the karaṇa, athruti, is what enables this transition. The dancer is no longer merely holding a position; rather, they are maintaining a stream of awareness through movement.

Aṅgahāra as samādhi:

The culmination of the fourth chapter of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* offers a statement that has often been read devotionally, but whose deeper implications may be philosophical:

महेश्वरस्य चरितं य इदं सम्प्रयोजयेत् ।
सर्वपापविशुद्धात्मा शिवलोकं स गच्छति ॥ (Sutra 4.319)

Earlier, we saw that Mahēśvarasya caritam refers to the Aṅgahāra as an activity of Mahēśvara himself. The dancer is not merely representing Śiva, nor imitating Śiva, but entering into a mode of activity that is identified with Śiva.

The second line states that one who practices this attains Śivaloka. The abode of Lord Śiva, also known as Śivaloka, carries various connotations within the Śaiva traditions. The *Vijñāna Bhairava Tantra* contains the following description:

dikkālakalanonmuktā deśoddeśāviśeṣiṇī
vyapadeṣṭumaśakyāsāv akathyā paramārthataḥ ॥ १४ ॥

antaḥ svānubhavānandā vikalponmuktagocarā
yāvasthā bharitākārā bhairavī bhairavātmanaḥ ॥ १५ ॥

- *Vijñāna Bhairava Tantra*, Sutra 14-15

According to Swami Lakshmanjoo⁶³:

This state of Bhairava is beyond the limitations of space, time, and form. It has no space, it has no time, it has no form. Do you know where Lord Śiva resides? In Śivaloka. The residence of Lord Śiva in this universe is

⁶³ Lakshmanjoo, Swami. *Vijñāna Bhairava: The Manual for Self Realization*. Edited by John Hughes, 2nd ed., Lakshmanjoo Academy, 2015.

said to be Mount Kailāsa. This is all humbug! There is no designation of the seat of Lord Śiva. Vyapadeṣṭum aśakyāsau—this state is, in fact, indescribable. It cannot be described. Akathyā paramārthataḥ—in reality, it cannot be spoken of. Antaḥ—it happens internally; it is filled with one's own ecstasy, one's own ānanda. It is beyond the apprehension of vikalpa (vikalponmuktagocarā), beyond thought. (21)

If aṅgahāra is understood as the embodiment of the activity of Śiva and its practice ultimately leads one to Śivaloka, then Śivaloka need not be interpreted merely as a physical abode. Rather, it may be understood as a state of consciousness that transcends the limitations of space, time, and form.

This interpretation becomes especially significant when viewed through the framework developed in this paper. If sthāna corresponds to dhāraṇā and karaṇa to dhyāna, then aṅgahāra may be understood as corresponding to samādhi. Just as samādhi culminates in the dissolution of ordinary distinctions and the absorption of awareness into a higher state of consciousness, aṅgahāra represents the culmination of nṛtta—a state in which individual movements cease to be experienced as separate actions and become integrated into a continuous, unified flow.

From this perspective, the promise of attaining Śivaloka is not merely an eschatological reward but may also be read as a description of an altered state of consciousness. Through the sustained practice of aṅgahāra, the performer gradually moves beyond ordinary bodily identity and enters into a mode of awareness associated with Mahēśvara himself. The dancer is no longer simply performing movement; rather, movement becomes the vehicle through which a transcendental state is approached.

Aṅgahāra within the Yogic framework:

Now let us break down the various concepts discussed within the Ashtanga Yoga and Kashmir Yoga philosophies with respect to samādhi. First, let us take a look at Sampragyata samādhi.

This is a very interesting line of inquiry because it allows us to move beyond a purely structural comparison and examine the inner phenomenology of performing an aṅgahāra.

वितर्कविचारानन्दास्मितारूपानुगमात्सम्प्रज्ञातः ॥ १.१७ ॥
vitarkavicārānandāsmitārūpānugamāt samprajñātaḥ ॥ 1.17 ॥

-Patanjali, *Yoga Sutras*, 1.17

The above Sutra translates to: "Samprajñāta samādhi is accompanied by (or follows) the forms of vitarka (reasoning), vicāra (subtle reflection), ānanda (bliss), and asmitā (pure I-ness)."

We first examine the phenomenon of samprajñāta samādhi through the example of a lotus flower. The sādhanika first concentrates on the gross form of the lotus—the petals and visible structure. Gradually the attention moves inward to subtler aspects such as its fragrance, essence, and even its constituent particles. From there the sādhanika begins to perceive the beauty and purpose inherent in creation itself. This gives rise to ānanda (bliss). Finally, beyond the object and beyond the bliss, there remains a subtle awareness of the conscious principle that experiences it—this is asmitā. Thus vitarka, vicāra, ānanda, and asmitā are not four unrelated states but successive refinements of attention moving from the gross to the subtle.

Applied to the context of nṛtta, a similar progression may be observed. At the outset, the dancer's awareness is occupied by the concrete details of execution. Attention is directed toward the precise placement of the feet, the alignment of the torso, the positioning of the hands, the trajectory of movement, and the transitions prescribed by the śāstra. The mind repeatedly checks, corrects, and re-establishes itself upon these technical details. This corresponds closely to vitarka. Just as the meditator begins with the gross form of the lotus, the dancer begins with the gross architecture of the body. One may even compare this stage to sthāna-kalpanā discussed earlier in relation to āṇavopāya, where attention is deliberately placed upon specific bodily configurations.

As execution deepens, however, attention gradually shifts away from the mechanics of the movement. The dancer no longer thinks primarily about whether the hand is exactly in the correct position or whether the foot has landed at the prescribed angle. Instead, awareness becomes absorbed in the inner quality or "subject-ness" of the karaṇa or aṅgahāra itself. The movement ceases to be experienced as a collection of parts and begins to reveal an underlying continuity. This stage may be understood as vicāra. Here attention moves from the gross form to the subtle principle embodied within the movement. The names, labels, and technical descriptions begin to recede into the background, while the essence of the movement becomes more prominent.

As this absorption becomes more complete, the dancer may experience a sense of ease, expansiveness, and joy. The effort that characterized the earlier stages begins to diminish. The movement appears to unfold of its own accord. This is not merely the pleasure of successful execution but a more subtle delight arising from sustained concentration itself. Just as the contemplator of the lotus eventually wonders at the beauty of creation, the dancer experiences the inherent joy of movement. This corresponds to ānanda. The movement is no longer something being performed; it becomes something being lived.

Beyond even this joy lies a more subtle state. As one karaṇa reaches completion and the transition to the next karaṇa presents itself, there emerges a moment that is neither entirely one movement nor the next. If attention remains uninterrupted, the dancer may encounter a heightened awareness of presence itself. At this point, the mind is no longer occupied with technique, nor even with the joy arising from execution. What remains is a simple and luminous sense of being—the awareness that underlies the entire process. This may be compared to asmitā in Patañjali's description of samprajñāta samādhi. It is not the ordinary egoic sense of "I am performing," but a more refined experience of "I-am-ness" itself.

Seen in this way, an aṅgahāra can be understood as a progressive inward journey. It begins with vitarka, where attention is fixed upon the gross details of bodily execution. It deepens into vicāra, where awareness becomes absorbed in the subtle essence of the

movement. From there arises ānanda, the joy born of sustained concentration and integration. Finally, in the seamless transition between karaṇas, there emerges asmitā, a pure sense of presence that remains when technical concerns and even delight have subsided. The aṅgahāra thus becomes not merely a sequence of movements but a vehicle through which the performer traverses the very stages of samprajñāta samādhi described by Patañjali.

This interpretation is admittedly exploratory, yet it offers a compelling framework through which the inner experience of performing an aṅgahāra may be understood. If Abhinavagupta's assertion that the aṅgahāra embodies Mahēśvarasya caritam is taken seriously, then the progression through vitarka, vicāra, ānanda, and asmitā may represent the gradual movement from technical action toward a state of consciousness in which the performer transcends ordinary bodily identity and approaches the contemplative state associated with Śiva himself.

Aṅgahāra within the Tantric framework:

Earlier, we looked at the aṅgahāra as a garland of limbs—a particular sequence of karaṇas strung together in a prescribed order. The knots in a garland were compared to the joints or gaps between movements. We also saw how Abhinavagupta, while discussing nṛtta māṭrkā, notes that when two karaṇas are combined, a sense of “I am dancing” arises. This emergence of self-awareness is significant because it introduces the notion of individuality into the otherwise continuous flow of movement.

A related explanation is provided by Jaideva Singh in his discussion of the Śiva Sūtras. According to him, the five kañcukas emerge from Māyā⁶⁴ and progressively contract the infinite powers of Śiva into the finite experience of the individual. Māyā generates the perception of separation and individuality. Kalā limits infinite agency into restricted capacity for action; Vidyā limits omniscience into partial knowledge; Rāga transforms fullness into desire and attachment; Kāla introduces temporal succession; and Niyati imposes limitation through circumstance, causality, and location.

⁶⁴ Singh, Jaideva. *Shiva Sūtras: The Yoga of Supreme Identity*. Motilal Banarsidass, 1979. p.XXIV

Together, these coverings explain how Universal Consciousness comes to experience itself as a finite individual.⁶⁵

Viewed through this lens, *māṭṛkā* may be understood as reinforcing the structures that sustain individuality. Abhinavagupta's observation that the union of two *karaṇas* gives rise to the awareness "I am dancing" can therefore be interpreted as the emergence of a subtle *ahaṃkāra*, born from the differentiating power of *Māyā*. The dancer is no longer merely moving; a sense of agency arises, accompanied by the recognition that "I" am the performer of the action.

If this interpretation is accepted, an interesting possibility emerges. The purpose of sustained concentration within an *aṅgaḥāra* may be understood as gradually transcending this very sense of individuality. Bharata states that combinations of two *karaṇas* form a *nṛtta māṭṛkā*, three form a *Kalāpaka*, four a *Śaṇḍaka*, and five a *Saṅghātaka*. Only when six, seven, or eight *karaṇas* are performed in an uninterrupted sequence does the composition qualify as an *aṅgaḥāra*.

Neither Bharata nor Abhinavagupta explicitly connect this progression to the doctrine of the *kañcukas*. However, the first five stages culminate in *Saṅghātaka*, a term whose etymology suggests the formation of an integrated composite. One may therefore view the progression from *Kalāpaka* to *Śaṇḍaka* to *Saṅghātaka* as reflecting an increasing degree of integration and continuity. The performer moves from discrete units toward a unified flow.

Within such a reading, the requirement that an *aṅgaḥāra* consist of at least six *karaṇas* becomes particularly suggestive. The uninterrupted succession of movements may represent a gradual transcendence of the limitations imposed by the five *kañcukas*. As attention becomes increasingly one-pointed, the sense of

⁶⁵ The five *kañcukas*—*kalā*, *vidyā*, *rāga*, *kāla*, and *niyati*—along with *māyā*, provide the framework within which the *jīva* experiences itself as a distinct being. In their absence, individuality would dissolve into the undifferentiated reality of *Śiva*. *Dhāraṇā*, therefore, denotes that which supports and maintains the very possibility of embodied existence. Swami Lakshmanjoo explains that the limitation for *Niyati* would be experienced as 'I love beautiful things' while the limitation imposed by *Rāga* would be a more specific type of attachment such as 'I love Denise'. In this manner each of the *Kaṇcukas* impose a limitation which is experienced in the form of 'I am'. Lakshmanjoo, Swami. *Light on Tantra in Kashmir Shaivism: Abhinavagupta's Tantrāloka*. Vol. 4, Chapter Five. Lakshmanjoo Academy, 2025.

separation generated by Māyā begins to weaken. The awareness “I am dancing” gives way to a more expansive state in which the dancer is absorbed into the movement itself.

Whether Bharata consciously intended such a correspondence cannot be established with certainty. Nevertheless, the structural parallels are striking. The progression from Kalāpaka, Śaṇḍaka, and Saṅghātaka to aṅgahāra appears to mirror a movement from multiplicity toward unity, from fragmented action toward uninterrupted flow, and ultimately from individuality toward a more universal mode of consciousness. This possibility is especially significant when we examine the relationship between aṅgahāra and samādhi from a Kashmir Shavism point of view.

Section 4

Evidence of Meditation in Ritual Dance Traditions of Southeast Asia:

The cultural and artistic links between India and Southeast Asia, particularly Indonesia, are well established and require little introduction. While numerous studies have confirmed these connections, much of the scholarship has focused primarily on demonstrating historical and artistic continuity. One of the most significant contributions in this regard is Dr. Padma Subrahmanyam’s *Common Dance Codes of India and Indonesia*,⁶⁶ which not only establishes shared artistic foundations but also identifies the presence and use of karaṇas in ancient Indonesia. Through a correlated study of sculpture, śāstra, and commentary, Dr. Subrahmanyam demonstrated striking parallels between the sculptural depictions found in the Prambanan temple complex in Java and her own reconstruction of the karaṇas based on South Indian temple sculptures and textual sources. Dr. Alessandra Iyer’s research⁶⁷ has further contributed to the validation and expansion of these findings.

⁶⁶ Subrahmanyam, Padma. *karaṇas: Common Dance Codes of India and Indonesia. Vol. I: A Dancer’s Perspective*. Nrithyodaya, 2022.

⁶⁷ Iyer, Alessandra. *Prambanan: Sculpture and Dance in Ancient Java: A Study in Dance Iconography*. White Lotus Press, 1998.

However, there remains considerable scope for research that goes beyond merely establishing connections. An equally important question is how different components of these knowledge systems have survived in various parts of the world and how they may contribute to a richer understanding of contemporary practice. Such an inquiry requires looking not only at movement vocabulary, but also at the philosophical, linguistic, and ritual frameworks within which these traditions evolved.

One of the most important insights to emerge from the author's own study is that artistic and ritual practice exists at the intersection of philosophy, language, and regional cultural traditions. In Indonesia, artistic practices continue to exist against a backdrop shaped by Śaiva, Buddhist, and later Sufi influences⁶⁸. These influences are neither incidental nor superficial; they remain embedded within the aesthetic and ritual life of both Balinese and Javanese performance traditions. Even to an untrained observer, the contemplative and esoteric dimensions of many of these traditions are immediately apparent.

The author's research into ritual dance practices in Java and Bali has led her on a deeply rewarding journey, one that has strengthened her conviction that many of the principles articulated in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* continue to survive in different forms within Southeast Asia. These traditions have undoubtedly undergone centuries of cultural transformation, requiring careful study to separate older strata from later accretions. Yet the underlying principles often remain remarkably intact.

Andrea Acri's study of the *Dharma Pātañjala*⁶⁹ explores a pre-fifteenth-century Old Javanese-Sanskrit Śaiva text that offers valuable insight into the transmission of Śaiva theology in pre-Islamic Indonesia. The work is particularly significant for its adaptation of Pātañjala *aṣṭāṅgayoga*—rather than the more common Śaiva *ṣaḍāṅgayoga* (referenced in many Javanese Saivite texts)—

⁶⁸ Javanese mysticism (*Kejawen*) is a syncretic spiritual tradition that blends indigenous beliefs with Hindu-Tantric Shaivism, Mahayana Buddhism, and Islamic Sufism, and continues to influence Javanese cultural and artistic practices. Rahapsari, Satwika. "The Quest of Finding the Self in the Bedhaya: Unravelling the Psychological Significance of the Javanese Sacred Dance." *Culture & Psychology*, vol. 28, no. 3, 2022, p. 415.

⁶⁹ Acri, Andrea. *Dharma Patañjala: Śaiva Scripture from Ancient Java Studied in the Light of Old Javanese and Sanskrit Texts*. International Academy of Indian Culture and Aditya Prakashan, 2017.

within a Śaiva doctrinal framework, reflecting a Yogasūtra commentarial tradition closely related to the Pantanjali's *Yogasūtras*.

Just as Kūṭiyāṭṭam preserves some aspects of Sanskrit theatre and performance practice that illuminate ideas mentioned in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*⁷⁰, ancient Javanese court dances⁷¹ appear to preserve dimensions of performance that can help us understand aspects of the text that are otherwise difficult to access. Since the *Nāṭyaśāstra* is fundamentally concerned with the metaphysics of movement and embodiment, rooted in broader cosmological principles, it is not surprising that many of its underlying ideas find resonance in ritual performance traditions across Asia. Specifically, the Bedhaya court dance of Java embodies elements of ritual and meditative dance that in the author's view can easily be viewed as parallel to ideas expressed in this paper. The concept of *Sawiji* bears a striking resemblance to dhāraṇā, as both emphasize one-pointed concentration and total presence⁷². Similarly, *Greged* may be understood as a consequence of sustained dhāraṇā, through which the dancer learns to regulate passion, master the ego, and maintain self-control⁷³. Furthermore, Bedhaya dancers often describe their psychological state during performance as one of "Semedi (Javanese cognate of samādhi)"⁷⁴, a conception that bears remarkable similarity to Abhinavagupta's interpretation of the dancer's state of absorption discussed earlier.

Suamba observes⁷⁵ that within Indonesian Śaiva Siddhānta, yoga occupies the highest spiritual position, serving as both the path and

⁷⁰ Gopalkrishnan, Sudha. *Kutiyattam and Its Correspondence to the Nāṭyaśāstra*. Sangeet Natak Akademi, 1988.

⁷¹ In particular, Bedhaya - a sacred court dance from Java - has a contemplative character, evident in the continuous and restrained flow of movement. This unbroken chain of movements resembles the execution of an *aṅgahāra*, where awareness of the transition between movements is emphasized. Equally noteworthy is the prominent use of grīvā and hasta rechakas in Bedhaya, which parallels the role of rechakas within the structure of aṅgahāras. These correspondences suggest deeper affinities between Bedhaya practice and the meditative dimensions of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, warranting further investigation. Supriyadi, Matheus Raoul, and Satwika Rahapsari. "The Psychological Aspects within the Yogyakarta Bedhaya: An Exploratory Study on Royal Court Dancers." *Culture & Psychology*, vol. 29, no. 3, 2023, pp. 607–643.

⁷² Rahapsari, Satwika. "The Quest of Finding the Self in the Bedhaya", p. 417

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 417

⁷⁴ Supriyadi, Matheus Raoul, and Satwika Rahapsari. "The Psychological Aspects within the Yogyakarta Bedhaya", pp. 611

⁷⁵ Suamba, Ida Bagus Putu. "Yoga Tradition in Bali-Hinduism." *Global Spiritualism*, edited by B. P. Siddhashrama, vol. 6, no. 2, Siddhaprakashna, 2007, p. 289

goal of liberation through the union of the *jīva* with *Paramaśiva* via *Ṣaḍaṅga Yoga*. Citing the Old Javanese *kakawin Arjuna Wiwāha* (1035 CE) by Mpu Kāṇva, he notes that *Paramaśiva* reveals Himself to the practitioner whose mind has been purified through knowledge and steadied through yoga. The text likens this state to calm, clear water capable of reflecting the moon. Significantly, *Arjuna Wiwāha* continues to influence Javanese dance traditions and is frequently adapted in *Bedhaya* performances, underscoring the enduring mystical and contemplative dimensions of the form⁷⁶. The broader philosophical correspondences between *Bedhaya* practice and yogic concepts are extensive enough to warrant a separate study and form an important foundation for future research.

What unites many of these traditions is that their primary purpose was never entertainment alone. Rather, performance functioned as a vehicle for self-transformation and spiritual realization. Dance and theatre served as disciplines through which the practitioner engaged with deeper philosophical truths. It is precisely this dimension that deserves greater attention in contemporary scholarship and practice. A more sustained study of Southeast Asian ritual dance traditions may provide valuable clues for understanding *karaṇas* and *aṅgahāras* not merely as aesthetic units of movement, but also as meditative and transformative practices.

Conclusion:

In recent years, there has been a growing interest among dancers and scholars in the study and reconstruction of *karaṇas* and *aṅgahāras*. Much of the contemporary practice, however, has focused primarily on questions of physical accuracy—whether a particular *karaṇa* is being executed correctly or incorrectly from a technical standpoint. While such inquiry is undoubtedly important, this paper has attempted to demonstrate that the mental and contemplative dimensions of these practices are equally significant. By examining references from the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, *Abhinavagupta*, the *Yogasūtras* of Patañjali, and the Kashmir Śaiva tradition, this study has proposed that *karaṇas* and *aṅgahāras* may

⁷⁶ Marwanto, Endraswara, S., and Kuswarsantyo. "Cultural and Artistic Dimensions in Javanese Traditional Dance: Comparative Case Studies of *Bedhaya Mintaraga* and *Bedhaya Arjuna Wiwaha*." *Research in Dance Education*, 2025, pp. 1–15.

be understood not merely as physical units of movement but also as meditative structures capable of transforming consciousness.

At present, karaṇas are largely explored within the domains of performance and entertainment. If further research can shed greater light on the meditative dimensions of karaṇa practice, it may open new avenues through which these traditions can be approached—not only as artistic forms but also as spiritual disciplines. Such a perspective has the potential to enrich both scholarship and practice.

The present study is only a preliminary step in this direction. Several related concepts remain to be investigated in greater depth. In particular, Piṇḍibandhas and Maṇḍalas still await systematic study and articulation beyond their performative applications. Like karaṇas and āṅgahāras, these too may preserve traces of a larger ritual and spiritual framework that has yet to be fully understood.

Finally, the author believes that a deeper engagement with Southeast Asian traditions can contribute significantly to the study of karaṇas and āṅgahāras. Regions such as Indonesia and Thailand continue to preserve ritual dance traditions that have remained closely connected to their sacred and ceremonial contexts. Comparative research in this area has the potential to broaden our understanding of nṛtta as a system of embodied meditation and spiritual practice.

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