

[Learning to Love Dance](#)

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ART

Learning to Love Dance

How I was inspired to study

Deepa Seetharaman, Florida

One Sunday, 12 years ago, right after we went to the temple, my mother took me to the car with a promise of an amazing surprise. I was five years old, very tired and very irritable. At that point, all I wanted to do was sleep. However, fate would not have that. In the next hour, I was introduced to my new dance teacher, Mrs. Harija Sinnarajah, and found myself to be the newest addition to the Vanee School of Dance.

Looking back, that must have been one of the most important moments of my life, though I was too young and sleepy to realize it. In fact, I wouldn't recognize it for a long time. I passed the next few years just cruising through dance class, fooling around. I gained a reputation for being a little restless, hyper and far too talkative. The reality was that I looked at my Sunday dance lessons as a time to socialize, not to explore the art of bharata natyam.

This all changed in the middle of a hot summer in 1997. Harija

Aunty had an activity for those of us who were staying home all summer—the start of dance camp. A new teacher from India had arrived, Mrs. Uma Sundaram, who would train us. Each day at dance camp was intense, difficult and very painful. We would start off with steps—slowly, at first, to work on our technique, and then faster, until our steps were acceptable. Just acceptable; we could never attain perfection in this teacher's eyes. Then she would choreograph dances for us to do. We would painfully attempt to convey sorrow, joy and devotion with our still immature features. It was pure torture; never in 12 years of existence had I endured such physical pain and mental agony. Yet, for some inexplicable reason, after every day I glowed. I learned that dance wasn't just a series of jumps and bumps. Each dance depicted a story. I was not just dancing—I was acting. When dance camp ended, I felt as though there was something missing. This was the turning point. I realized how much I truly enjoyed dance.

It is a gift of age to gain wisdom and recognition for what is truly around us. It was at this point, this tender age of 12, that I slowly began to recognize my true love for dance. For me, dance is a portal. It is a means to connect with my culture and express my feelings. It is a method of prayer and a way of transforming into another person.

So, I decided I wanted to do my arangetram, or premier performance. I had no idea what I was getting into. First, I went to India and joined my dance camp mentor, Uma Aunty, for a "crash course." Dance classes were physically taxing, no doubt. For 90 minutes, I was her clay to mold. She made me bend my waist to the point where I thought my muscles would pull apart. I sat in such deep aramandi that my quadriceps

shook in pain. My knees were so bruised from doing mandiadavi I thought they would bleed. Never mind the pain. I left India with great improvement and some very impressive items for my program.

In the year that followed, I practiced, studied and participated in various other activities. But summer came and the countdown began. Everything else was swept from the slate. I slept, ate, drank and breathed dance. I practiced for two hours a day, doing every item at least once. All the while, time was quickly fading away. Two months to go, one month, one week, one day, one hour!

Suddenly, it was August 11, 2001, the day of my program. Tempers were running high. At dress rehearsal, the night before, I was terribly offbeat, forgetting several lines and hyperventilating in fear. Conditions were uncomfortable backstage—people digging bobby pins deep into my scalp, applying about ten pounds of gook to my face, and pricking me with safety pins. I was uncomfortable and sticky and nervous—but also inexpressibly happy. The singer warming up her voice, the mridangam player tuning his instrument, the sweet sound of the flute and the melodious music of the violin, caused a burst of happiness throughout my being. I cannot begin to describe the deep pleasure that dwells in my heart

when I walk onto stage. I am no longer Deepa Seetharaman. I am Radha or Krishna or Ram or Sita or Parvathi or Siva. I am not insignificant, but great, feared, loved and respected. There is a rush, an indescribable feeling that sweeps over me the second I begin dancing. With those few minutes on stage, everything—the pain, the tears, the frustration—is worth it.

Deepa Seetharaman, 17, is a junior at Pine Crest Prep school in Fortlauderdale, Florida. At her arangetram, or premier dance recital, Deepa performed a number of dances, including one accompanied by a devotional song by Sri Sathya Sai Baba.