

St. Petersburg, December 5-13, 2001
Wali & Ariëne van der Zwan



Due to flight schemes we spent a full week in St. Petersburg for our weekend workshop. We decided to make it worthwhile and use the time the best we could. Below we will highlight the major events.

Fri 7 – Su 9: Weekend workshop:

The workshop was attended by some 30 –40 persons, most of them from St. Petersburg, some from Moscow, one from Estonia (Silje) and two from Latvia (Fatima and her sister). All of the dance teachers from the local Saturday and Sunday meetings were present most or whole of the time with the exception of Vasudeva (who was at Grishena). As theme for the weekend we had chosen 'Strength and Compassion'. With this theme we tried to work towards understanding of SAM's translation of 'Allah ho Akbar': 'Peace is Power'. The same feeling is expressed in one of the gathas of Zarathoustra:

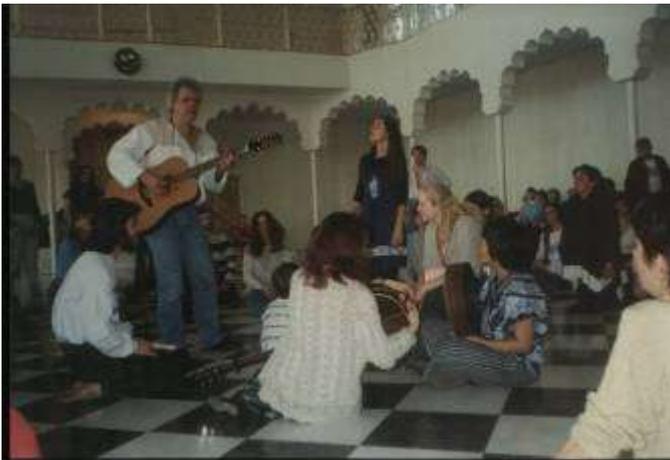
*Will there ever come a day for us to face our enemies in the eyes without bias,
to walk together as carefree children in your flowering vineyards?
Will ever a generation of rulers arise whose power lies in weakness only?
And whose clamour is peace?*

In the workshop we tried to serve different goals. We will name them and define how we worked towards these goals:

1. Support the Dance teachers by having them experience Dances through our attunement (key 3 of Radha's ten keys to leading the Dances) and embodying them so they can lead them. For this reason we dances both foundation Dances, Dances presented at the Festival (Peasant Zikr, Lord make me an instrument), new Dances that are hot in the international circuit (Maliqa's Ganesha), the Lord's Prayer (which in Russia is seldom danced but somehow known by all). All in all we presented over the Friday night and weekend some 30 Dances.
2. Continue our earlier work with the Aramaic Jesus (Beatitudes) both on the Festival and in workshops as a form of in depth training over a longer period, repeating some themes and Dances (I am statements, Beatitudes) and offering new ones.
3. Support the Dance teachers' study group of the different traditions. Through initiative of our student Helena the main emerging teachers are now in the process of studying one tradition at a time for deeper understanding. The group has studied Hinduism and is now working with Judaism. We started Friday with a series of three Hindu dances, followed by three Jewish Dances (plus explanation of Sabbath) to support this initiative and add to it. Both traditions were woven into the Saturday and Sunday as well.

4. Bring a deeper understanding of the traditions in relation to the esoterics behind the Dances in short 'dharma talks' of about half an hour as preparation for some of the deeper dances. This was linked with understanding of the philosophy of the Dances as a spiritual Path. Both elements from the traditions (trimurti, the four Paths of Creation Spirituality, Sabbath, the structure of the Lord's Prayer) were presented as 'models' (so not the reality) to understand something of the complexity of our lives and the situation the world is in and our own personal inner beings.
5. Offering different teachers the opportunity to accompany the Dances with drum (Shahodat, little Misha, Fatima) or guitar (Volodya).
6. Deepening the theme, chosen also to offer an answer with Dances to September 11, which again linked the Dances to every day life. This theme led to a Sunday with The Lord's Prayer (introduced from the Four Paths) after a session with SAM's originals (ending with the Three Wazifa Dance). In this session we presented our approach to SAM, the three F's: from Focus to Fun ending in Freedom (though you don't always reach the last stage). These three F's in reality also stand for the Dances in general with their structured choreography, their joy and their ultimate philosophy of liberty.
7. This all in all led us to present the workshop as a general workshop for all dancers and – on a different level – as training for our students and other dances teachers. We ourselves feel we succeeded more than before in doing this, as more students are active as teachers and in the mentioned study groups. We feel that we ourselves also have grown in this approach.

Mentees & other teachers



After the workshop we had two afternoon meetings with our St. Petersburg mentees (Shahodat, Helena, Marina). In these meetings the depth of their questions happily surprised us. The workshop had brought up personal issues like the relation between orthodox Russian faith and the spirituality transmitted in the Dances, the role of the models presented in our thinking (and the fact that these are not the real truth), the depth of SAM's Dances (and the longing to study them deeper), but also practical issues as how to make a program from the energy of the Dances, how to end a Dance etc. Apart from these sessions we also talked with

and visited several other teachers. Gillian offered to write a report for OP, which will reach you in due course. Let us here suffice to paraphrase her that these workshop visits in her understanding and experience are very important for the growth of the Dance teachers as this allows them to experience leadership styles on a deeper level. She states that Volodya is more and more learning to exploit his guitar as an instrument to changing or establishing the atmosphere of the dances. On a different occasion we discussed the Saturday group, which is open for students and suggested maybe the newer students may find their own study group outside of the Saturday, preparing them for the 'real work', as too many teachers and not enough in depth teaching in the end will hollow out the Saturday group. The Sunday group held by Jamila is not as open for participation of others. The teamwork of the Festival serves as a model for the Saturday group (Gillian, Helena, Shahodat, Marina, Rahima). We suggested for further growth that teachers should also lead longer sessions (of two or three dances).



Network issues

Our trip was well timed as we could in person discuss any further plans. In a meeting with the network (fully present but for Vitaly who had a job interview) it was proposed (by Misha) and agreed (by all) that – time, money and Allah willing – we will do the proposed training not after the Festival (clashes with Inlakesh) or the week before (clashes with preparation), but instead in September in the Crimea. Like last year most – if not all – teachers will be present for the Crimean Camp, which we could support also. We offered to be present not as much as staff (it is and should be a Russian Camp) but to lead Dances on request and be available for support and possibly advise. This would also allow us to in depth experience the teachings of our students Shahodat and Helena (who hold the focus of the Camp). Jamila (who also will be at this camp and originally was the first to ask us for a training) also was enthused by this new idea. The low costs of life in the Krim area will balance the travel costs from St. Petersburg or other regions. For Russians a visa is not needed. The Network will inform OP on this change of plans.

After this we talked more general issues. We again and over again underlined the importance of the network deciding on invitations and building up some sort of policy, rather than following and saying yes to any invitation. This is difficult as some teachers come anyway on invitations from individuals. This resulted in an overkill of teachers over the last half year (apart from the invited Anahata & Prema and us also James (same month as Prema/Anahata) and Marc Havill (same month as us). Karin (Germany, DHO) cancelled her trip for late November. We stressed that the network should somehow analyze the 'food' this generation of teachers needs for further growth and work from there. As a contrast: on our last workshop in April we were the first foreign Dance teachers visiting for almost a full year...



Monday 10/Tuesday 11: Zikr & recording

On Monday evening we presented our zikr, after which we shared Hindu mantras and bhadjans on the harmonium. The informality of it all made it into a real Sufi gathering and allowed us to present some well-known mantras and melodies from a different angle. For us it also was a preparation for a planned recording of the zikr. We planned to do this as we want to offer the recording to the Russian Dance Family as a token of our gratitude for their hospitality, hoping it will help them towards understanding of the practice of zikr. It is our way of 'paying back' some of what we gained from them. Although this is no issue for OP (who turned the proposal down) we nonetheless include it here, to keep you all informed.

The recording was done on the next Tuesday evening in a professional studio. We are indebted to Volodya for arranging it all. The zikr was recorded in a semi-live session with some ten participants. It was an experience in focus and concentration and also in singing, as we gave some simple but effective singing instructions which immediately changed the atmosphere of the singing. Untutored as the voices will sound on the final recording, the recording session of some 5 hours concentrated work was a wonderful short retreat into the world of chanted zikr. That alone already made our money spent worthwhile. We hope to finish and polish the recording later this year or January in Holland and will send a copy to OP.

Ariënne & Wali, December 2001