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The Zen Dance of 8:00 a.m. ballet class

Developing a meditative dance practice can help you find more focus, awareness, and enjoyment, making class refreshing and exciting

by Lucy Dillon

What does meditation mean to you? Does it mean falling asleep on your yoga mat during savasana? Does it mean taking some deep breaths before bedtime? Maybe you have an app on your phone that guides you through some relaxation exercises. I'm going to guess that, to you, meditation does not mean tendus at the barre or an across-the-floor exercise in jazz class. You're too busy focusing on your alignment, remembering the combination, and thinking about all your other corrections during your technique classes. How could 8:00 a.m. modern III be a meditation? Well, by the end of this essay, perhaps I will convince you that you can consider your dance technique classes and performances a movement meditation. You may even find a new sense of presence and ability to connect to your body, your movement, and your fellow dancers.

If you're skeptical about the prospect of viewing dance as meditation, consider the many other forms of movement meditation around the world, such as t'ai chi. According to Sophia Delza, a dancer, scholar, and practitioner of t'ai chi, it's is "an ancient Chinese system of exercise which activates the body for the superior development of physical, emotional, and mental well-being." T'ai chi is a highly structured movement practice where partakers follow a set series of motions that vary in dynamics (much like choreography). Delza describes it as "a moving three-dimensional mural." Delza argues that because t'ai chi is concerned with space, shape, motif, and time, it truly is an art form similar to dance or music. One difference, Delza argues, is that t'ai chi does not require a viewer, as artworks do, to be fully realized. With t'ai chi, "it is the doer, the performer of this masterpiece, who reacts to the art of this art at the same time as he becomes the art" (Delza). As an awareness practice, t'ai chi brings the practitioner into the present moment, allowing her body and mind to become and appreciate the movement simultaneously. As a dancer, I find this description of t'ai chi extremely intriguing. What would it be like to find this level of awareness in a dance class, to be totally absorbed in your choreography, in both body and mind?

There is a meditation-like practice in Sufism, as well. Sufism is the "dimension of Islamic mysticism that transports the seeker on the path into higher states of consciousness" (Irene Markoff). According to Markoff, worshippers in Sufi orders often use poetry, music, and dance movements "to induce or conduct trance or ecstatic states." In Turkey, the Mevlevi order practices a ritual that includes spinning repeatedly while others sing poetry or play music. This repetitive movement structure is used to find "spiritual intoxication" (Markoff). T'ai chi and the practices of Sufism do not have the same goals, purposes, or origins, but both are examples of physical activity leading to an aware or spiritual state of mind. Thus, movement can be something deeper than a purely physical endeavor.

Maybe now you're convinced that meditation does not have to be a still, silent practice. How does that relate to your ballet class? Sŏn-ok Yi, Alan Heyman, and John Chang McCurdy's *Zen Dance: Movement as Meditation* explores the ways Korean Buddhism has viewed dance as

meditation, calling this practice Zen Dance. The Zen Dance approach can be beneficial to anyone because it “reaffirms the inseparability of the corporeal with the noncorporeal, the tangible with the intangible.” The authors particularly speak to dancers, offering techniques that concert dancers can apply to their classes and performances.

The first of these techniques from Zen Dance is finding a mantra, a repeated phrase that a dancer has in her mind while moving. The purpose of this mantra, according to Yi, Heyman, and McCurdy, is to eliminate the “idle chatter” that can distract a dancer, thus calming the mind and reducing the “anxieties of the performer.” In the second technique, the performer asks *hwa-tou*, an unanswerable question, which allows the dancer, according to the authors, to “enter a state beyond the limits of intellect.” An unanswerable question could be something like: “What am I?” or “What is my true self?” The purpose of asking an unanswerable question is to bring the dancer into a state of humility and curiosity, reminding the dancer of how much is beyond human intellect, inviting the dancer to move with wonder, awe, and fascination. The third technique is to move with *tanjun* breathing. The Zen Dance approach understands *tanjun* breathing as “the body’s point of contact with the energy of the universe.” With conscious breath, the dancer can connect both internally to one’s own body and externally to those around them. The authors argue that, by practicing these techniques from the Zen Dance, dancers can “develop new poise, self-possession, and stage presence, while their aesthetic facilities and concentration are enhanced.”

I’ve demonstrated that movement is often considered meditation around the globe and that techniques from meditation, like the Zen Dance, can directly relate to dance classes and performances. So, is it possible to find a meditative practice while in class at university? Yes, I believe it is. Do I think it is easy? No, I definitely don’t. While writing this essay, I have been attempting to apply the three techniques of the Zen Dance to my own technique classes with a varied amount of success. Coming into class I have great intentions; I’ve decided on my mantra, my unanswerable question, and I focus on my *tanjun* breathing. About halfway through class I usually realize I’ve lost track of the Zen Dance, finding myself thinking about other technical concepts. Rather than view this as a failure, I recognize this departure from my initial intentions as a normal part of any meditation. Therefore, I simply remind myself to come back to my Zen Dance and reapply the three techniques.

After my experiments with meditation in dance class, I’ve realized that, for myself, the techniques of the Zen Dance are useful but challenging to apply at all times. Sometimes I need to enter an intellectual head-space in order to learn difficult choreography or a challenging new concept. However, when I find myself over-thinking movement or overwhelmed and too “in my own head,” these techniques are extremely helpful in bringing myself to the present and aware of my dancing body. Having access to a meditative dance practice has allowed me to find a focus, awareness, and enjoyment that makes class refreshing and exciting.

I encourage you, now, to re-answer the question, “What does meditation mean to you?” I hope that your definition of meditation has opened up to include movement practices, even dance. Perhaps the next time you’re feeling exhausted in your modern class, can’t stop thinking about the midterm you have to take next period, or are worried about a tough rehearsal you have later on today, you can approach your technique class in a new way. Instead of allowing overwhelming thoughts to hinder your movement, perhaps you can dance the Zen Dance and find new freedom.

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