

# Open Practice Sessions Reflection

Nadia Milford - Curious about Connection and Passionate about Compassion

“Art is the lie that makes us realise **truth.**” - Picasso

In my current practice I've been unpacking the correlation between yoga and dance. In particular, the idea of dance as a form of meditation.

The facilitations I led in Open Practice aimed to guide dancers through a series of tasks which encouraged self discovery. I've been using the yogic philosophy of the 'Koshas' which can be described simply as the different layers of self. These layers: the gross, subtle and bliss bodies translate to physical, mental and spiritual bodies. This concept was introduced to me during my yoga teacher training and it changed my perspective on the way I experience the world as I began to consider which body I am living most through, when and why.

## The Philosophy of Flow

The sessions' practice involved exploring each of the layers in isolation to understand how to become aware of our tendencies. Particular focus was given to the 'bliss body' which is broadly described across different philosophies and theories as a state of being in the present moment. The bliss body is the source of our creativity. A Sufi poet Rumi describes this state as “a fountainhead from within you, moving out”. He acknowledges that creativity honors another kind of intelligence that originates from within us rather than from outside sources.

This state is as, its name suggests, blissful. You are completely present, placing value in your unique knowledge. To me, dance is absolutely a meditation. It comes from an indescribable place inside - one of acceptance, presence and a connection to this deep layer of self and the universe.

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi creator of the term 'Flow' or 'Flowstate' also describes this phenomenon in his research studies stating, “When you are really involved in this completely engaging process of creating something new, you don't have enough attention left to monitor how the body feels... your identity disappears from your consciousness”.

This bliss body state formed the focus of my Open Practice facilitations. I aimed to elicit this state in the dancers to enable authentic creativity and connection to unfold. From this place of being, I also attempted to ask the question: **Is a connection to self really a connection to all?** If, like Mihaly suggests, we are no longer our identity (gender, race, socioeconomic status etc) who are we?

Through a process of practice and discussion the participants revealed moments of freedom and described this state as a sense of *oneness*.

### **Reflections from inside the process**

Taken from my reflection notes:

*Yoga means 'unity'*

*We all rise to the same sun*

*We revolve around it together*

*We exist in relation to each other and this earth*

*We find peace through balance and harmony*

*We find our place, our purpose through a sense of community and contribution*

Inside the experience:

"A physical sensation of awareness of my whole body in space - feeling the air dense around me and moving through me as it enters my lungs, awakening every cell, pumping the oxygen through my veins which run through and around every organ, bone and muscle. A feeling of endless space - space between thoughts, between breaths, between joints, between bones, between cells, between atoms, between each nucleus and their neutrons. I am just space. I move through the space around me - behind me, above me and below me. I am absorbed in this investigation. I am lost in space.

Stillness. I am still, yet there is movement. My body carries itself. It functions subconsciously - I notice these functions. The breath, the heart beat, the proprioception and my sensory experience - taste, touch, scent, sight. I can see the space around me - how is it carrying me? How does it support me? This floor supports my feet, this roof and these walls contain me. What is my relation to this space and what am I accepting in this moment? I can allow myself to be and embrace the freedom of this choice. Each moment is new so then, what changes when I change?

My thoughts flow from my mind into my body and out through the movement. Each movement changes as my thoughts change. I acknowledge them. Then I choose to either keep them or let them go. Mostly, I let them go."

### **The Investigation- Happenings and Findings**

My investigation was about understanding what being in the bliss body felt like (to find a loose definition) and then explore how dancers can elicit this state. Across the various sessions I gave dancers different stimuli to explore possible avenues into this state of presence/oneness so that I can understand how to better facilitate this experience.

**Music** seemed to dictate a certain physical response among the dancers and guided a collective energy. On reflection we discussed whether it is a true connection if it is guided by

another source. I've found music can be used as a gateway to induce the state but as the attention level deepens, it becomes less needed.

Following explorations involved being inspired by **nature** - something which often creates a feeling of calm and connection to something greater. We watched how plants are so deeply rooted in being and responded in the moment. Participants revealed a sense of calm and discussed the difficulty of transporting this experience into a studio setting which has the familiarity of past expectations - a certain kind of creativity, virtuosity or behaviour.

We did a group task which asked the dancers to close their eyes and respond to **touch**. Removing sight was particularly successful in finding a place of being, listening and responding. It appeared to be a direct pathway into the body and encouraged a sense of curiosity and connection. The dancers revealed that this process of receiving outward stimulus of touch relieved the pressure to create content and immediately a deep listening occurred. Participants recalled a sensation of self that was part of a whole. The group thought, and moved as one entity. This sense of identity in the bliss state leads to the idea that bliss is found in connection to all and a feeling of selflessness - a connection which is heightened in a sharing of dance.

During the sessions we would start with a **pranayama** and gradually participants were invited to move. The lack of impulses to move initially surprised me. When asked to find stillness in the mind the common impulse was to focus on also finding stillness in the body. Overcoming the dominance of the mental body is a big challenge I've identified - our brain wants to produce too many thoughts. From past reflections of my self discoveries I'd written, "judgement kills creativity". Critical analysis of our creativity is often habitual - particularly with dancers that are used to working more technically. My personal experience is that by focusing on moving I am able to live less through my mind and more in my body and as the expression evolves as I connect more with my spiritual self through creativity. I found this in my yoga practice - only once I've worked my body am I prepared for stillness.

What surprised me more from this reflection was the realisation that I was looking for a certain style of performance. I was looking for responses which conveyed the sensation of the meditation in an image that is potentially false - my image of a dancers' meditation may not be the same as another's. It's often difficult to understand the experience of the participant in the moment. However, I do believe I found more of what I was searching for toward the end of each session. The nature of improvisation involves lengthy exploration to arrive at something. Much like still meditation, it takes deep focus and plenty of practice to find a place of being. I want to explore this with more dancers. If a connection to the self is a connection to all - what is our sameness? What does this look like? I'm still exploring the answers to these questions.

### **Beyond now**

In summary, the facilitation offered an opportunity to honour self, and enabled me to realise the potential of dance to engender truth, clarity and compassion.

In its broader application, I'm curious to understand how audiences could connect to dancers' experiences. Can a dancer's physical response to the present moment be a direct conversation with the audience and can the audience experience the meditative benefits vicariously? These are ideas I'd like to raise in future developments.

The universal language of dance appeals directly to the bliss body, your sense of self and others. To me, this is the ideal avenue for understanding new perspectives. In particular, how both yoga and dance have the power to unify people in the present moment. Through creativity we find common ground - we become one.