

The way out is in (Thich Nhat Hanh): Cultivating awareness through meditation for dancers

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Introduction

In this article, we share our findings from a research intervention at Rambert School of Ballet and Contemporary Dance in the UK which focused on meditation practices for dancers. The purpose of this article is to consider the intentions, context, design, methodology, process and outcomes of the research, with the aim of sharing how our work can be applied in various dance contexts. We invite dance practitioners to explore some of our meditation approaches via a toolkit of videos and reflective prompts which dancers and teachers can apply in their own context.

Context and Rationale

Conservatoire dance training prioritizes technical excellence, performance outcomes and employability, often at the expense of psychological skill development. Students frequently face high expectation and perfectionism, stress and anxiety, low self-esteem and self-worth, and a pressure to demonstrate resilience.¹⁻⁴

Through our research and practice, we argue for a shift toward a pedagogical model rooted in ethics of care, autonomy and embodied self-awareness. Meditation is positioned as a somatic and contemplative practice that supports self-regulation, agency and well-being,⁵ disrupting traditional externally driven, performance-focused training models.

Research Summary

We designed a small-scale qualitative study with 15 second-year contemporary dance students, focusing on meditation practices created for dancers which focused on self-care, emotional regulation and focus, and body awareness, while providing a non-judgmental space away from performance pressure. Our overall research aim was to evaluate the impact and effectiveness of a specifically-designed meditation program on the well-being and performance-related capacities of dance students in a conservatoire context. Our study evaluated an eight-week meditation program designed for undergraduate dance students within a conservatoire training environment.

Our specific objectives were:

1. To investigate whether meditation reduces perceived stress and anxiety by exploring its role in emotional regulation and coping strategies.
2. To assess improvements in mindfulness and self-awareness through fostering cognitive clarity, emotional insight and non-judgmental awareness.
3. To evaluate changes in body perception and somatic awareness by heightening awareness of tension, injury and spatial presence.
4. To examine the development of psychological skills relevant to dance teaching such as self-confidence, self-acceptance, focus and concentration, and self-regulation.
5. To explore the value of meditation as a sustainable self-care toolkit that students can autonomously practice.
6. To consider the broader pedagogical implications of meditation by embedding care in conservatoire curricula, shifting authority towards student agency, and integrating contemplative practices into dance education.

Over eight weeks, we facilitated weekly guided meditation sessions including reflection and feedback, alongside recorded practices for students to continue practicing independently. Data were gathered through reflective journals, final questionnaires and semi-structured interviews.

Our findings suggest that meditation can support growth in emotional and cognitive awareness; indeed, by the end of the course, most participants described feeling more confident, and being kinder and grateful towards themselves. Students reported being better able to distinguish between helpful and unhelpful thoughts and feelings, and over time, were increasingly capable of redirecting negative mental patterns and relating to their inner experiences with less judgment. Breath awareness became an especially practical tool because it was a quick and effective way to interrupt negative self-talk and reconnect with a more compassionate mindset. Participants described improvements in concentration and self-awareness with clearer thoughts, less self-judgment, better emotional regulation and stronger coping skills when dealing with stress or anxiety. Many also mentioned increased self-acceptance and confidence.

Participants also noticed that regular meditation practice enhanced their sensitivity to bodily sensations, becoming more aware of core temperature, muscular tension, fatigue and the

early signs of potential injury. Meditation created a dedicated moment to check in with the body, which many students found helpful in their recognizing and caring for pain and injury before it escalated. This awareness translated into clearer movement choices and a better understanding of habitual movement patterns too.

Importantly, no adverse effects were reported. Although some students initially found it challenging to sit still or maintain focus for longer periods, these difficulties softened with regular practice. All participants described meditation as a useful self-care tool, and most expressed a clear intention to continue practising on their own. For these participants, consistency in meditation practice really mattered; the more regularly students practised, the more benefits they noticed. Participants described positive shifts in how they saw themselves, both in daily life and in the studio.

The high level of engagement from students and their strong motivation to continue their meditation practice independently suggests that meditation can be a valuable educational resource for students in professional dance training that can be integrated sustainably and meaningfully for those taking part. At Rambert School, meditation sessions have continued beyond the project, a decision rooted in the physical, emotional and psychological well-being benefits students identified. Keeping meditation within the program reflects a broader commitment to supporting dancers not only as performers, but as whole human beings, fostering a culture of self-awareness, self-care and resilience within professional dance training.

A Practical Toolkit for Meditation for Dancers and Teachers

The following toolkit is a practical, adaptable resource designed to support dancers, dance teachers, practitioners and institutions in practicing meditation as a means to embed care, awareness and resilience within dance education and professional practice. Built around five themes from our research (attention; somatic awareness; emotional/cognitive awareness; kindness/self-compassion; and resilience), the toolkit provides prompts and video links to micro-meditation practices which readers can try out for themselves. The toolkit offers practical entry points rather than prescriptive solutions, inviting ongoing inquiry amongst dancers and teachers to adapt the materials to their specific context and community. The toolkit recognizes that psychological skills and somatic awareness are not separate from performance, but underpin sustainable artistic development.

Theme 1

Attention

The Tool: *Mindfulness (vipasana)* to cultivate focus, clarity and present-moment awareness

This tool supports your:

- Development of sustained and flexible attention within studio performance contexts, as well as individual practice
- Noticing when your attention drifts, becoming aware of distraction without judgement, and consciously returning to the task in hand

Practices might include:

- Breath anchoring
- Sensory awareness
- Check-ins before and after class

The aim is not rigid concentration but responsive awareness and ability to shift focus intentionally, manage overstimulation and remain present under pressure. In dance contexts it strengthens retention of material, responsiveness to feedback and embodied presence in performance.



[Watch a short video to practice mindfulness to cultivate attention](#)

Prompts for reflection and factors to consider

1. When and where can you carve out dedicated time and space to activate this tool?
2. Listening can be hard to achieve and is often challenging for students to do straightaway.
3. Full presence in each task, situation or context may be tricky too, especially for neurodivergent individuals
4. Practicing non-judgment takes time, but consistency and repetition will help.

Theme 2

Somatic Awareness

The Tool: *Body Scan* to strengthen the connection to breath and embodied perception, and focus on internal awareness of physical sensation

This tool supports you to:

- Center the body as a source of knowledge rather than only an object of correction
- Notice internal sensations, patterns of tension, breath dynamics and spatial orientation

Through practising, dancers develop:

- Sensitivity to subtle body cues, including early signs of fatigue and strain
- Enhanced injury awareness, roundedness and clarity of movement

By shifting attention inward, this theme balances external feedback (mirrors, teachers, audiences) with internal sensing, supporting dancers' autonomy and embodied authority.



[Watch a short video to practice a body scan for somatic awareness](#)

Prompts for reflection and factors to consider

1. How can you integrate this tool in daily sessions, for example, listening to your body whilst moving, closing your eyes during an exercise, slowing the pace of an exercise or task to connect with your internal physical sensations?
2. How might you use this as a gateway into improvisational or creative processes?
3. Body scanning is helpful to refine technical precision, and really useful for when finding stillness is challenging for dancers.
4. Body scanning encourages interoceptive awareness; there might be ways to connect meditation practice with other somatic approaches such as integrating body scanning with slow exploratory movement, combining scanning during breathwork, or applying body scanning during rest or recovery periods.

Theme 3

Emotional and Cognitive Awareness

The Tool: *Visualisation* to recognise thoughts, emotions and internal patterns and nurture clarity, detachment and non-identification

This tool:

- Supports the identification of emotional responses and habitual thinking patterns
- Encourages dancers to notice negative self-talk, anxiety triggers, maladaptive perfectionistic tendencies and avoidance behaviours

Practices might include:

- Guided reflection
- Thought labelling
- Reframing exercises

Rather than suppressing emotion, the focus is on developing emotional literacy by naming experiences, understanding their impact and learning to respond rather than react. Over time, this strengthens self-regulation, clarity and perspective in high-pressure situations.



[Watch a short video to practice visualization to recognise thoughts and emotions](#)

Prompts for reflection and factors to consider

1. By acknowledging what is there and encouraging a sense of presence, how can dancers and teachers create safe spaces for exploring emotional and cognitive awareness?
2. Where is visualization most useful to explore in your context?
3. How might emotional and cognitive awareness connect with your own personal, educational, professional and artistic values?
4. Addressing emotional states can be overwhelming, so progressing gently and with care for yourself and others is important. Encouraging clarity of emotional thought requires time; again consistency and repetition will help.
5. Do check your safeguarding policies and procedures when doing this kind of work.

Theme 4

Kindness and Self-Compassion

The Tool: *Self-Compassion Visualisation* to introduce practices that cultivate non-judgement, acceptance and compassionate internal language, to help reduce self-judgement and foster a supportive inner dialogue

This tool:

- Encourages dancers to relate to mistakes, setbacks and vulnerability with curiosity rather than criticism
- Supports sustainable motivation and psychological safety

By strengthening self-compassion, dancers develop resilience, confidence and a healthy relationship with challenge - qualities essential for long-term artistic development.



[Watch a short video to practice visualization for self-compassion and kindness](#)

Prompts for reflection and factors to consider

1. In practicing gratitude and cultivating a healthy relationship with yourself, how can you consider the use of compassionate language in your practice, and encourage this in others?
2. How can you use the concepts of kindness and compassion in formal processes such as teaching and assessment?
3. In using this tool to counter maladaptive perfectionistic tendencies or self-judgment, remember to be sensitive to those who may have these attitudes. It's likely they might need time and space to explore these ideas at their own pace.

Theme 5

Resilience

The Tool: *The Mountain Meditation* to develop adaptive responses to challenge and sustain well-being in high-pressure contexts

This tool:

- Builds capacity to navigate difficulty without becoming overwhelmed or disengaged
- Helps dancers strengthen their ability to remain steady under pressure, recover from disappointment and maintain motivation without compromising well-being

Practices encourage:

- Reframing setbacks as part of growth
- Recognising stress responses early
- Responding with intentional strategies rather than reactive patterns



[Watch a short video to practice resilience](#)

Prompts for reflection and factors to consider

- How would you define resilience in your context and how can you encourage it mindfully?
- How might you integrate the concept of resilience in your practice by using, for example, goal setting or reflective practices?
- Resilience comes in many forms, so what internal and external sources of support do you have available to you and students/dancers?
- In embracing an integrated, holistic sense of self for teachers, students and dancers, what institutional responsibilities regarding mindful practices might be necessary, alongside encouraging personal resilience strategies?

Conclusion

Meditation offers dancers a practical pathway to cultivate awareness, emotional regulation and compassionate self-understanding within the demanding context of conservatoire-based dance education and training. Our findings suggest that integrating meditation practices into dance education can strengthen focus, resilience and embodied autonomy, supporting dancers as whole human beings. By embedding care-centered approaches such as meditation within curricula and daily studio practice, dance organizations can foster more sustainable, reflective and humane models of artistic training.

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Further Reading

Kabat-Zinn J. *Wherever You Go, There You Are: Mindfulness Meditation in Everyday Life*. Hyperion Books; 1994.

Wherever You Go, There You Are is an accessible guide for individuals to consider how they might integrate mindfulness into their daily lives, and has immediately recognizable implications for dancers' and teachers' practice, training and education. When initially approaching mindfulness, it can be difficult for dancers to know how to bridge the gaps between relevance, execution and effective wellbeing outcomes; this book provides the doorway to this information in an engaging and non-esoteric format. Kabat-Zinn provides a theoretical overview of mindfulness as the practice of paying attention to the present moment intentionally and without judgment, offering a foundation for improved emotional regulation and well-being.

The text explains how cultivating this awareness helps individuals become more attuned to thoughts, emotions and bodily sensations, which is crucial for dancers navigating the high-pressure environment of rehearsals and performance. Throughout the chapters, Kabat-Zinn highlights the role of "non-striving" and the "beginner's mind," offering a step-by-step philosophical framework which dancers and teachers can consider in relation to their own habits and reactions. By providing specific mindfulness activities and "non-doing" exercises, the book offers a practical access point for supporting a more conscious engagement with daily life and, through application, the specificities of dance education. Ultimately, this book demystifies mindfulness as a construct, offering a vital resource for cultivating the psychological resilience and focus necessary for long-term artistic growth.

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