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The innate human potential of elevated and ecstatic states of consciousness: Examining freeform dance as a means of access

ABSTRACT

Throughout time and across global, spiritual traditions and cultures, elevated/ecstatic states of human experience have been recognized, aspired to and valued as discernible, relevant and inherent states of consciousness for humans to access regularly. This article offers an overview of the existence of the human, innate drive to attain elevated/ecstatic states. This subject area has been examined through a variety of theories, from the biological to the philosophical, and referenced to the considerable body of research on this topic. The authors propose that

KEYWORDS

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these states are normal, necessary and purposeful. We posit the emerging genre of freeform/ecstatic dance as being at the beginning stages of a potential cultural revival – a ‘movement’ movement of sorts – as this genre re-introduces western and eastern cultures to what is, in reality, an ancient tradition carried out by and chronicled in civilizations throughout time. Freeform/ecstatic ways of movement and release are put forth as a practical and effective way of accessing essentially blissful and expanded states of consciousness that can, in turn, enhance mood, improve self-esteem and provide a practical application for a postmodern daily wellness practice.

INTRODUCTION

The word ‘ecstasy’ – commonly thought of as a heightened state of pleasure or consciousness – is defined by Stedman’s Medical Dictionary as ‘an overpowering emotion, exaltation or state of sudden, intense feeling of rapturous delight and mental transport to the contemplation of the divine’. The word derives from the Greek *ekstatikos*, based on *ek*-meaning ‘out’ and *histanai* meaning ‘to place’. In other words, a state where we are, in a sense, temporarily outside of or beside our individual selves. It is an intentional, yet can also be, a spontaneous departure or being ‘moved’ – from one’s regular state to an elevated, uplifted and energized state of ease, flow and delight.

By bringing academic attention toward and exploring this overlooked area of living, the authors present the genre of freeform and ecstatic dance as an effortless way to access and activate these essential, elevated states of being. Specifically, this article compares and contrasts the benefits of freeform dance with those of the more popular and widely accepted practice of yoga and traditional meditative practices.

An established understanding of the art and practice of yoga is that it represents the cultivation of healthy connections with oneself through learning tools that help one *direct awareness inwardly* in a deliberate, physical and self-reflective yet non-cerebral state.

By contrast, freeform dance is presented as helping one to adopt and develop a healthy connection with oneself, resulting from literally and figuratively ‘being moved’, with *awareness being directed outwardly*, in self-expression. From here onwards, reference to this genre of dance will be stated interchangeably as freeform/ecstatic, freeform or ecstatic.

The authors’ overall intentions are as follows:

- presenting ecstatic states as accessible and like traditional meditative states – specifically yoga – as observable, identifiable, discernible, able to be sensed and experienced and naming them as such, specifically, exploring the existence and attainment of these states as providing a potentially universally available experience of feelings of bliss, uplift and pleasure as an inherent part of being human.
- examining freeform/ecstatic dance as an effective method of attaining these elevated and energized experiences, and moreover, as a highly accessible method of generating inner well-being and helping the individual develop wellness-generating, higher-level experiences and expanded consciousness.

- exploring freeform/ecstatic dance as an emerging method or genre of movement that is at the beginning stages of gaining recognition and exposure as an effective, enjoyable and easily acquired self-care, health practice on a personal level, within the wellness sector as well as in society at large.

The authors present this method of somatic movement – drawing on their combined, several decades of experience in the wellness field – as a versatile and readily available and accessible wellness modality for people of all ages and walks of life. Furthermore, they postulate that it can be considered a cost-free, therapeutic method that can be done by anyone, anywhere and anytime – alone or with others. And ... it's fun and makes you feel good.

They draw on research and experience dancing with thousands of people through their work at the Center for Transformative Movement (CTM), in Boulder, Colorado, where author Lisa Fasullo is founder and director. The findings – evidence-based and anecdotal – demonstrate that freeform dance provides direct access to these elevated states of consciousness and the associated, ecstatic experiences that have a myriad of resultant, transformative effects over time.

ECSTATIC STATES OF AWARENESS

Einstein (1982) described ecstatic experience as the 'mystic emotion' and spoke of it as 'the finest emotion of which we are capable', 'the germ of all art and all true science' and 'the core of the true religious sentiment'.

In common parlance, the term 'ecstasy' denotes an impactful, euphoric and transportive experience. Björkqvist observed that '[f]or obvious reasons, it is rarely used in a scientific context; it is a concept that is extremely hard to define' (1981). Throughout time and across cultures, the meaning imbued in the concept of ecstasy has been examined, explained and experienced by neuroscientists, philosophers, shamans, musicians, religious leaders, drug users and others all seeking its resultant, near-universal sense of awe, rapture, euphoria and bliss.

It is the authors' conviction that the seeking and attainment of ecstatic states has been misunderstood in our society today. As opposed to these uplifted states of consciousness being recognized and encouraged, established institutions sometimes tend to consider the heightened conditions 'an escape' and label them as superfluous, non-productive and even 'negative'. It is a forgotten human instinct that has been misunderstood and thus un-named, unexplored and under-rated. One of the intentions of this article is to contribute to the growing body of literature that aims to re-interpret and reframe ecstatic and elevated states as occurring organically within humans and existing furthermore as health-regenerating tendencies that are important to be fulfilled and satisfied on a regular basis.

Literature, research and examination of current popular pastimes such as international professional athletic tournaments, group church gatherings and music performances attract thousands of people. Such events exemplify a modern way in which humans, especially in western cultures, are drawn together through group activities that can deepen as well as heighten a person's sense of connection within themselves and, through expansion, with others and the larger world around them.



Figure 1: A poster reminding participants about the wellness benefits - feeling uplifted, elevated and energized - associated with Freeform / Ecstatic Dance at one of The Center for Transformative Movement's city-wide, dance gatherings offered free of charge to the community to encourage participation. Photograph by Erik Lasko.

Ecstatic states induced by ritualized procedures and shared by members of different bands are proposed as one of the key mechanisms by which strong, emotional bonds were created and maintained between bands. Such ritualized procedures involve the subsuming of individual identities and priorities under unifying concepts, thus enabling bands to overcome natural tendencies to exclusivity in times of stress.

(Hayden 1987: 81)

Here, Hayden emphasizes his theory on elevated states as being physiologically evolutionary as well as having the effect of unifying tribe members. Use of psychoactive substances has long been a method used to elevate and alter consciousness in both traditional and postmodern societies.

NEURO-SPIRITUAL PERSPECTIVES ON ELEVATED STATES OF CONSCIOUSNESS

Psychologists of the twentieth century have drawn on both western and eastern thought, positing theories of higher, adult development specifically based around accessing and harnessing elevated states of consciousness. Twenty-first-century neuroscience is unfolding the brain activity associated with these enduring human experiences and has located specific brain areas and EEG activity associated with spiritual and ecstatic states.

Additional support for this view appears in a study published in May 2018 by Columbia University and Yale team. This study identified what the researchers term a 'neurobiological home' for spirituality within humans. When there's a sense of connection with something greater than the self the inferior parietal lobule (IPL) of the brain is activated. Speaking of the findings, Professor Marc Potenza of the Yale Child Study Center said, '[u]nderstanding the neural bases of spiritual experiences may help us better understand their roles in resilience and recovery from mental health and addictive disorders' (Hathaway 2018). As research continues to document the experience and pathways that can give lived expression to these experiences, it is an exciting and encouraging time to be contributing substantively to the growing initiative of examining the role of freeform dance in this context.

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW AND DOCUMENTATION

By presenting an overview of these experiences, we wish to highlight their commonality. It is our intention to reveal that these experiences are independent of cultural beliefs and practices thereby suggesting that their presence as an innate, human potential with different points of access to such experiences within different traditions.

What is alike in all of these ecstatic traditions is their respective recognition, celebration and creation of their particular practices of inviting in these important, necessary and functional uplifted states of being. Religious ecstasy is defined as a discernible, sensed and experienced type of altered state of consciousness characterized by greatly reduced external awareness and expanded, interior mental and spiritual awareness, frequently accompanied by visions and emotional, intuitive, and sometimes physical euphoria. Although the experience is usually brief in time, there are records of such experiences lasting several days or more and of recurring experiences of ecstasy during one's lifetime (Laski, 1961).

The experience of elevated states of consciousness, sometimes described as ecstatic states, has been recorded across spiritual traditions of the East, Middle East and the West. We highlight some of the more well-known and recognized cultural practices and outcomes as global examples.

Eastern thought

Examples of these are present in Vedanta, which continues to reach and attract a world audience. Vedanta is based around cultivating experiences as 'bliss'

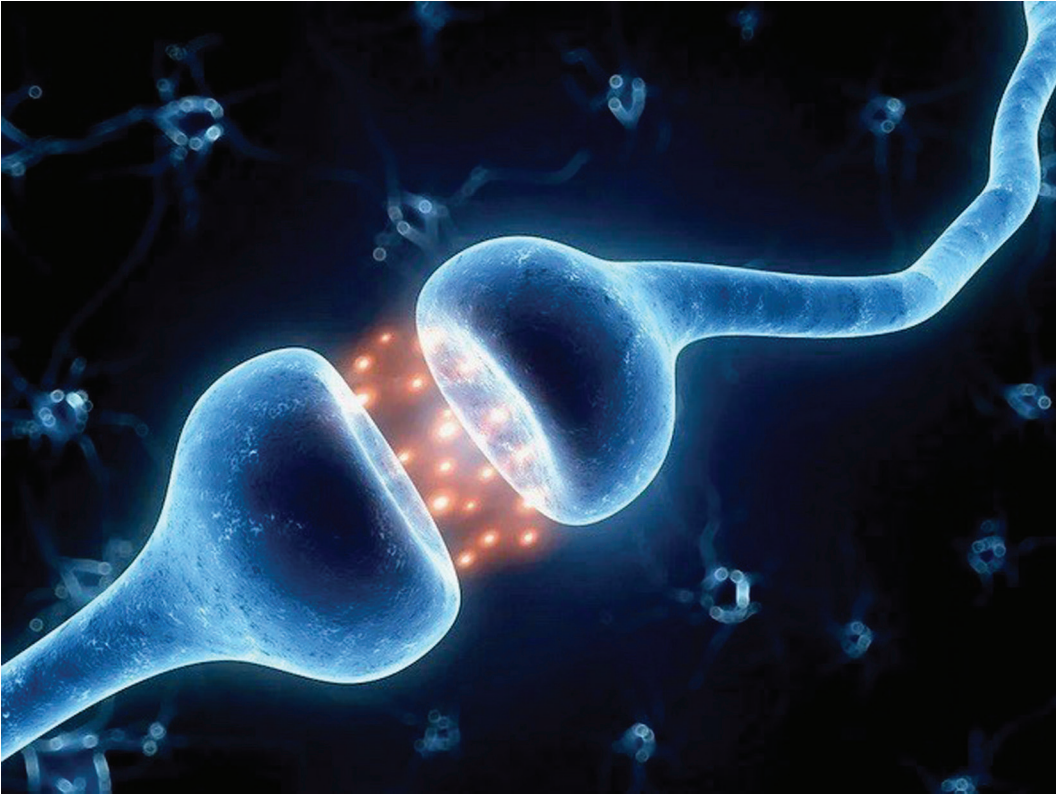


Figure 2: Research by a Columbia University and Yale team identified that the inferior parietal lobule (IPL) - what the researchers term a 'neurobiological home' - as being the brain part that gives humans the sense of connection with something greater than the self. Photograph by <https://gulfnews.com/uae/science/scientists-pinpoint-spiritual-part-of-human-brain-1.2230447>.

– extreme happiness, one of the highest states of being – referred to as a state of *ananda*. Vedanta is based around cultivating an experience of *ananda* – what more recent accounts describe as ecstatic experiences – as an actual birthright of humans and latent as a potential within the human brain. Practitioners access this feel-good potential through dance, meditation, chanting and the worship of deities. Specific strategies for actualizing this state on a lived basis include the yogic traditions of bhakti yoga, jnana yoga, karma yoga and raja yoga. The Vedantic reference to ecstatic experiences as being 'a birthright' can be perceived as supporting the authors' theory that *elevated states* are inherent and innate to being human.

Buddhism is another popular, international, theological framework that places its meditative and sensory practices as the foundation for enlightenment; Buddhist philosophy, through its concept of Nirvana, describes the practices for attaining a state of emptiness, the extinguishing of the individual self, as the foundation for enlightenment. At its essence, Buddhist teaching holds that Nirvana can be reached because it *already dwells* as the inmost 'consciousness' of the human being.

The Buddhist reference to the inner and already-dwelling enlightened consciousness within parallels and supports the previously cited present-day

Columbia University research findings of the ‘neurobiological home’, the IPL, the part of the human brain seemingly hard-wired for spirituality.

In Judaism, Kabbalah is the distinctive pathway within the overall religion – a school of mysticism that emphasizes attaining the ecstatic experience as being essential for optimal living. Specifically, ‘Kabbalah’ comes from the Hebrew word meaning ‘tradition’ or ‘received knowledge’, which can take the form of seeing a ‘second’ physical body near one’s real body, having the sense that one’s self is alternating between the real physical body and an outside double or feeling that one’s self has left the body and is observing from above (<https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2003/06/what-is-kabbalah.html>).

Here again, there exists historical reference to and evidence of the practiced and welcomed state of ecstasy accurately representing its etymological roots: ex-stasis, being out of or next to one’s body. Not only is ecstasy a universally experienced feel-good state, it is again credited as being a determinant of wellness, joy and playfulness – the natural state of being.¹

Sufi Muslim mystics of Persia and India used a series of strategies to attain, experience and enjoy ecstatic states including fasting, prayer, chanting, music and many forms of movement. Perhaps, the most recognized and revered Sufi leader is the great thirteenth-century theologian and mystic poet, Rumi. Rumi is often associated with the whirling dance of Sama and the declaration that all the Sufi practices help the human soul connect with its divine source.²

This allusion to cultivating one’s spiritual practice with the intention of re-connecting with a divine source can be seen as another way of stating that humans are connected with and a part of something larger and more vast and that performing certain intentional actions can and does prompt that natural and already-existing re-connection.

Although Africa is a continent with many different cultures, countries and languages, and its dance traditions encompass a wide spectrum of community dance, what is common to all is their wholehearted, ubiquitous and matter-of-fact manner in which they hold ecstatic states of being as inherent to the human being and to the consciousness of all living things including plants and animals and even climate. Unlike many western civilizations that can argue about the existence of meta-physical, ‘non-provable’ phenomena, people in many African cultures grow up with and experience these uplifted states through (1) reverence for nature and the life force around them, (2) the felt vibration of drumming, (3) plant medicines and (4) the magic and/or the speaking in tongues.

In a study titled ‘Samadhi: The highest stage of human development – Implications for African societies’, Hotep (2014) argues that without societal recourse to these ecstatic states documented throughout all African traditions ‘Africa will remain disunited, weak and powerless’. Hotep links societal unification and empowerment to the citizens’ ability to access ecstatic states and transcendence pointing to what may be the source of the epidemics of health and mental wellness issues present in many western countries in postmodern society.

Western theology

Figures such as the Spanish Carmelite nun Theresa of Avila (1515–82) – who during a long period of illness pursued a series of different spiritual exercises – wrote that during her illness she rose from the lowest stage to the ‘devotions of silence’ or even to the ‘devotions of ecstasy’, which was one of perfect union with God. Through continued reverence for the divine, the Spanish nun essentially allowed and cultivated herself as a vessel for something larger than

1. <https://www.newscientist.com/article/mg22730331-300-kabbalah-mystical-neuroscience/#ixzz6E7gFraP1>.
2. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/20/books/review/rumi-brad-gooch.html>.

her more limited self, which resulted in her living alongside the presence of and with the wellness-generating ability to activate within herself ecstatic and highly blissful states of being.

A much earlier Mediaeval mystic, the German Benedictine abbess, Hildegard von Bingen (1098–1179), experienced ecstatic states of consciousness during which she received and recorded visions on the nature of humanity and its divine connection. Hildegard von Bingen detailed an intricate relationship between the human as microcosm and the universe as macrocosm (Dronke 1996).

More recently, Matthew Fox, a Dominican priest, theologian, writer and teacher, has referenced Hildegard's work in framing a creation– and nature-centred spirituality – a philosophy of mystical artistry, universal compassion and the celebration of the divine within each human soul. Fox has said:

I think that people are born mystics – we are all mystics as children, but it's taken away from us as we grow older. It's taken away subtly by education, which trains the left brain and ignores the right brain. They take away your crayons right when you need them most – at puberty. When you should be getting to your cosmic soul [...] they give you football and shopping-malls. [...] Spirituality is about mysticism which is about awe and wonder and the prophetic dimension of standing up to injustice because it interferes with our wonder.

(Fox, online interview)

The Quakers, a founding influence in America, advocate silent waiting for the inward light or that of *God in every person* at their meetings.

Although spiritual traditions or religious ideologies differ slightly in their principles, practices and perception, they each base the entirety of their body of thought on seeing the human being in definitive connection with something somehow larger than oneself. Furthermore, the pursuit, as demonstrated by these cultural examples, can many times reward one with highly positive, uplifted and health-generating pleasurable states of being. The excitement lies in the new development of, or rediscovery of, ancient practices that can pervade and positively influence a person's daily life, as opposed to being a separate and infrequent experience.

Contemporary western ideologies

Twentieth-century theorists of human development such as Abraham Maslow and Lawrence Kohlberg posited in their later work the possibility of higher stages of human functioning, characterized by Maslow as a transcendental stage of human functioning and by Kohlberg as a universal state of moral thinking. Theorists such as Ken Wilber have built bridges to Indian philosophy and human consciousness.

Maslow is mostly remembered for his stage theory of human development and the end stage of self-actualization, viz. the growth of an individual towards fulfilment of the highest needs. However, unknown to most familiar with his more popular theories, Maslow went further in his later writings and addressed the deep question of how far human development can go. Here, he focused on what he called transcendence:

Transcendence refers to the very highest and most inclusive or holistic levels of human consciousness, behaving and relating, as ends rather than means, to oneself, to significant others, to human beings in general, to other species, to nature, and to the cosmos.

(Maslow 1971: 269)

By placing transcendence, or 'self-transcendence', above self-actualization, Maslow produced a radically different model of the end-stage or highest level of human development than had been culturally agreed upon in western psychological thought at that time.

Transpersonal psychology theorist Ken Wilber draws on the teachings of the Indian spiritual teacher Sri Aurobindo to posit that the individual's evolution proceeds through the successive stages of matter, life and mind, beyond the ordinary mental level to progressive stages of higher spiritual consciousness, and finally the absolute.

Scientific evidence: Brain plasticity, meditation and elevated states

As science begins to understand the neurological correlates of these experiences, evidence mounts in support of the validity of elevated states and their transformative value and the potential for the further development of a range of methods to achieve these experiences. Central to understanding the human ability to experience elevated states of consciousness is the notion of brain plasticity – the capacity of the human brain to make new neural connections, for largely discrete areas of the brain to work in coordination with one another and for new neural development to take place in the adult brain.

Referred to as neuroplasticity, this is the manner in which our brain has the intrinsic ability to continuously alter its structure and function throughout our lifetime. Neural changes occur on multiple levels, ranging from the microscopic to the observable. It happens on different time scales, spanning mere milliseconds to years and decades.

Neuro-psychiatrist Dr Lawrence Choy (2018), in a chapter on brain plasticity in the Global Wellness Institute's White Paper on Mental Wellness, has addressed the importance of this concept of brain plasticity:

We now have substantial scientific evidence that explains how wellness habits promote our brain to change and rewire itself through a lifelong process termed Neuroplasticity. The strengthening and integration of the neural connections in the higher-level brain regions, particularly the prefrontal cortex, are fundamental in the benefits of wellness practices.

(Chow 2018:19)

In gaining a deeper understanding of neuroplasticity, its practical applications and its effects on one's sense of well-being, researchers are continuing their quest toward better harnessing the brain's immeasurable potential to be positively influenced by intentional wellness practices and most importantly spreading the knowledge as factual, not speculative, that every person has the ability to empower themselves and each other toward meaningful growth and positive change.

This is a new foundation for building pathways to mental wellness. The intrinsic capacity for the brain to grow and develop integrated neural



Figure 3: Theologian Matthew Fox, 80, has worked to reinvent forms of worship by bringing elements of ecstatic rave such as dance into the Western Liturgy. The Cosmic Mass - group Freeform Dance - has been celebrated over 100 times in dozens of cities in North America. Photograph by MF Staff.

connections in response to lifestyle changes and routines offers new insights into just how far human development can advance within an individual's lifespan.

Meditation and brain plasticity

Well-established pathways to achieving higher states of human awareness include meditation, yoga, and spiritual exercises such as prayer and contemplation. Four decades of studies highlight the effects of meditation in enhancing immunity, reducing depression and anxiety, improving academic performance, reducing age-related cognitive decline, increasing happiness and quality of life and managing and reducing trauma. Brain changes associated with the practice of meditation include enhanced neural plasticity and increased grey and white matter development in the brains of meditators (Bodeker 2018).

From a very practical point of view, elevated states in modern-day western culture continue to be associated with – through re-connecting them with their natural and inborn state of being – the likely possibility of transferring increased levels of ease and joy and a more consistent and accessible sense of confidence to peoples' daily routines as they attend to areas of their lives such as relationships, career and parenting among others.

In an article that explores transcendental experiences during meditation practice, Travis (2014) has identified these as being characterized by the

absence of time, space and body sense. Over time, meditators experience that these experiences are lived on a regular basis in waking consciousness along with everyday activity, which ultimately allows these individuals to experience more ease and not tend to accumulate stress as much as non-meditators. Described in Vedic terminology as *turyateet chetna*, this experience of a sustained elevated state of awareness in everyday activity has been termed 'cosmic consciousness' in English. Travis reports that physiologically

Cosmic Consciousness is marked by the coexistence of $\alpha 1$ electroencephalography (EEG) with delta EEG during deep sleep, and higher brain integration, greater emotional stability, and decreased anxiety during challenging tasks. Transcendental experiences may be the engine that fosters higher human development.

(Travis 2017: 1-8)

YOGA AND FREEFORM DANCE AS AN ACCESS TO ELEVATED STATES

Western and global revival: The ancient practice of yoga

Increasingly over the past half century, western culture has adopted wholeheartedly the ancient practice of yoga – for some as a form of recreation and fitness and for others as a revered spiritual practice, community orientation and overall lifestyle.

The yoga industry in America alone – comprised of sectors as diverse as fashion, instructor certification programmes, worldwide vacation retreats, in person as well as online classes and programmes – is projected to reach \$11.6 billion in 2020 (<https://www.statista.com/statistics/605335/us-yoga-industry-revenue/>). Numerous trademarked brands based upon the ancient eastern practice of yoga have become recognized household names, and classes are regularly attended by individuals who may have never before been drawn to areas such as fitness, health, meditation or mindfulness.

The ultimate goal of yoga philosophy as stated in the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali is as follows: 'the cessation of the transformations of ordinary awareness' and 'attaining a content-less altered state of awareness', which is 'spiritual liberation' (Larson and Bhattacharya 1987). This quieted inner state is generated through a combination of breathing exercises, physical postures/asanas and continually drawing awareness into the body and the way it feels while in these postures. Through these stated ways, students of yoga learn tools and strategies by exploring their inner terrain that allow them to cultivate the ability to connect with themselves through drawing attention inwardly. It is this focal point of using the breath to activate and connect with the body and mind in this inner way that can theoretically result in a peaceful, grounded experience during class as well as the ability to apply these developing abilities to daily life.

It is telling that this ancient art has entered more conventional use among the general population in the West, whereas less than 50 years ago, yoga was for the most part relegated and considered by the mainstream demographics of society to be overly religious and shrouded in somewhat strange esoteric mystery.

From inward-focused awareness to outward, dynamic expression

Mainstream populations increasingly want to experience the same wide-reaching benefits they have learned are possible through the practice of yoga to movement meditation forms that claim to help bring about a similarly deep, yet distinctly different connection through outward, dynamic expression – specifically freeform dance.

A recent parallel research interest has arisen around the transformative ability of connecting to oneself meditatively in a more energized way through outward, dynamic expression – literally and figuratively letting loose, letting go and feeling the freedom that ensues from that physical and emotional release when we move our body dynamically in a freeform way. Within this growing research interest freestyle, self-guided, intuitive movement and dance are gaining attention and forming recreation, fitness, mental wellness and health-generating industries of their own.

What makes this movement modality ‘freeform’ is the fact that there is no choreography to learn, only simple guidance and encouragement from the facilitator. There’s no teacher in the front of the room leading and no complicated steps to follow.

Freeform dance is very simply people dancing, either alone or in a group, with no planned steps or moves, no choreography, no memorization, no goals and no expected form or sequence. It is a fusion of moving meditation, soul-enlivening music, creative self-expression, welcoming and friendly community and a complete ‘go with the flow’ attitude.

DANCE RESEARCH

Recent years have seen a growth in dance scholarship, including analysis of the many neurological and health dimensions of dance. The *Oxford Handbook of Dance and Wellbeing* (Karkou et al. 2017) examines dance and related movement practices from the perspectives of neuroscience and health, community and education, and psychology and sociology to contribute to an understanding of well-being.

A report in the online newsletter of the Harvard Mahoney Neuroscience Institute in the Harvard Medical School states that ‘[s]tudies show that dance helps reduce stress, increases levels of the feel-good hormone serotonin, and helps develop new neural connections, especially in regions involved in executive function, long-term memory, and spatial recognition’ (Edwards 2016:). Women participating in a programme named Dancing Mindfulness, a fusion of dance and a mindful approach to meditation, reported improvements in emotional and spiritual well-being, increased acceptance, positive changes to the self and the increased application of mindfulness techniques and strategies to real-world living (Howell 2015).

Additionally, participants in a women’s study on the transformative benefits of dance (Fasullo et al. 2016) reported a consistently increased sense of inner confidence, better awareness of their own sensual expression, improved self-compassion, reduced anxiety, reduced depression and positive changes in emotional regulation. The pilot study also provided an opportunity to focus on and refine the vision of what really are the most important elements of expressive dance’s effects on personality.

Brain researchers studying dance report that dance, in contrast to other forms of exercise, not only results in increased growth of grey and white matter in the motor areas of the brain (as seen in other athletes) but also

produces increased brain development in the meaning areas of the brain – i.e. the prefrontal cortex.

Moving in ways that are outside of the linear scope of walking, sitting and reaching can be seen as being similar to learning ‘steps’ in that the body and brain need to develop new associations/neuro-pathways to accommodate the new way of creatively moving. It can be seen as creating new internal reference points where future movement of this kind, and the accompanying elevated state can begin to accumulate and over time serve as a reservoir for both activating and radiating the pleasure of the cumulative internally stored uplifted feelings throughout the body, mind and spirit.

Research published in the *Annals of the New York Academy of Science* addresses why a movement exercise such as dance would produce changes in the meaning areas of the brain. Researchers take the view that dance has been from early human evolution a means of communication (Karpati et al. 2015) – communication with the divine, communication with animal spirits before a hunt, communication with weather forces, communication with ancestral spirits, as well as communication with other dancers. Dance is a response to rhythm, vibration and music, and it expresses humanity’s connectedness – with one another, with the environment, with the planets and with unseen influences in nature and the universe. This sense of connectedness is one of the deep foundations of mental well-being.

Yoga and meditation, the pillars of Indian practices for attaining elevated states of consciousness, also find a parallel in experiences of Indian classical dance.

In her book, *A Yoga of Indian Classical Dance*, Roxanne Kamayani Gupta notes: ‘its association with the cosmic dancer, Lord Shiva Nataraja, indicates that Indian dance is deeply rooted in ancient techniques of invoking ecstatic states of consciousness’ (Gupta 2000).

Elsewhere, Indian dancers have been described as embodying the experience of ecstasy and bliss: ‘[r]hythm or taal springs spontaneously from their steps; expression or bhava, which is the essence of dance, flows from the communicative eyes and provides rasa i.e. ecstasy, and ananda, joy’ (Gupta 2002).

Gupta’s view of ecstatic experience from the perspective of Indian classical dance is that reaching such a state through dance is both a long process and a rare achievement. Yet, the authors’ own research and practice with freeform dance in a 2015 pilot study showed that freeform, creative movement offers a more immediate means for experiencing well-being, elevated states and ecstatic experiences (Fasullo et al. 2016). In the 2015 study, over the course of eight weeks, participants reported it being easy and exciting as they noticed a renewed sense of unspoken ‘permission’ showing up outside of class allowing them to really ‘let go’. The encouragement for full expressiveness positively activated a whole renewed constellation of feel-good ways of existing in body, mind and attitude. Participants internalized a sense of ‘permission’ to perceive both (1) their own self-awareness and (2) the ability to generate in themselves ecstasy and joy in new, exciting and unexpected ways through the practice of expressive, freeform movement. This resulted in reports of a subtle, yet profound blossoming of parts of themselves. They physically, cognitively and emotionally re-accessed their more playful, confident, joyous, selves with an accompanying sense of ease that they had not had full contact with or access to prior to their immersion in the eight-week pilot study.

Taking a neurobiological view of this type of phenomenon, Yasmin Henkesh (2016) references the brainwave activity accompanying mystic dance:

Simply listening to music, for example, generates theta, but adding the right percussive rhythms intensifies it. Scientists have discovered that excessive theta can wreak havoc. For example, strong signature theta (higher than normal resting theta levels) is associated with drug addiction, alcoholism, head injury, stroke, cerebral palsy.

(Henkesh 2016 100)

In other words, dance offers a means for creating an ecstatic, brain experience from a waveform that can be destructive if not given balanced expression: it is creative energy when harnessed, destructive energy when unharnessed. Seen in this light, moving our bodies freely as they want to move in the moment is a way of providing a structure for the release of accumulated tensions in our bodies. The authors sometimes encourage people who are feeling self-conscious about their ability to dance, who do not know the right steps or just how to let themselves go, to simply 'throw a happy tantrum'. The invitation to let go like that consistently inspires participants to do just that – let it all go and push and reach and twist and kick, which quickly has them smiling – many times completely surprised, yet excited to see their own particular grooves emerging so naturally once they feel the permission to just let go.

FREEFORM DANCE

Pedagogy

What distinguishes a traditional ecstatic dance from other types of group dance, e.g. a group of friends dancing together at a party in someone's home, a dance club environment or a wedding atmosphere where people are socially dancing together, is specifically the context or container in which the dance is held by all who attend. This includes the structure of intentional guidelines presented by the facilitator.

The art and practice of ecstatic dance is centred around the experience of exploring the experience – the internal as well as the physical exploration – of what it feels like to be 'moved' to move one's body to the musical vibrations heard and felt. This is achieved by intentionally providing a welcoming, safe and non-judgmental physical space in which participants can move.

This is in direct contrast to how most people function throughout their daily routines or even in dance or yoga classes. Here, the physical body operates in response to neuro-cognitive thought patterns, even though internally generated, which stem from hearing directives from or through copying the instructor. An external stimulus provides a particular command or suggestive and then the nervous system and body carry that directive out, which results in a specific movement or resultant constellation of movements.

In a freeform dance environment, the invitation, the encouragement and the actual guidelines provided are specifically for participants to move for the entirety of the dance session, for no particular reason, without any intended result and without concern or attachment to what they might look like in that process. Ultimately, the encouraging 'permission' to actively and intentionally let go of, release, literally shake off and unburden oneself – of continually having to manage all mental thoughts and dialogue that underlie one's

subsequent emotions, actions and communications – is what distinguishes freeform/ecstatic dance from conventional, guided dance.

Opposite to the art and practice of yoga, which employs a variety of tools for quieting mental activity in order to access a more sensation-generated experience of self through the body, freeform dance offers its container. It is specifically its container – the elemental make-up of music, intentional guidelines, absence of teaching, community orientation and a non-verbal social environment – that is the tool that enables participants to feel into the present moment within themselves somatically, whatever they might be feeling, sensing and thinking in the moment. However, instead of cognitively ‘thinking about’ what they are feeling sensorially, they are sensing the activation and



Figure 4: A participant expressing her pure elation dancing outside at a DANCE with a DOC! Dance-Wellness program uniting medical doctors with individuals wanting to dance and learn more about the health and wellness benefits of dance in Boulder, Colorado offered by The Center for Transformative Movement. Photograph By Stacey Brown.

simultaneously translating these sensations somatically, through the internal perspective of their body. Similar to mindfulness practices that help a person enlarge their capacity for pleasurable as well as any painful thoughts or sensations freeform dance through the cultivation of movement as opposed to the cultivation of stillness provides the experience of and increased capacity for one to allow and to hold physically whatever thoughts, feelings or sensations might be highlighted at any given time.

It is the accumulation of the quality of presence or mindfulness, or in this case body-fullness – a soaring sense of elation and upliftment to a higher state, what feels like a release of accumulated stress and ultimately an expanded lightness in body, emotions and spirit – that long-time ecstatic-dance practitioners report being able to tap into effortlessly and intentionally with this type of dance when it becomes a regular, self-care practice. They describe this sense as the predominant feeling within them for the time they dance, even if they might have been feeling worried, depressed, angry or some other un-pleasurable emotion before they started dancing.

This deepening and enjoyment of one's bodily self-awareness, as well as a direct connection with a deeper sense of knowingness can be seen as a 'sixth sense' that is free of the rational brain and connected to a fundamental awareness of and joy of experiencing the body moving in space. This is known as 'interoception' – or the attention to internal bodily states. 'Because interoceptive ability is so closely linked to emotional awareness these findings suggest that the body awareness of dancers might also help to develop their emotional awareness', reports the music and dance research team led by Christensen (2017). 'This is very important, especially considering that there is also a study with musicians showing higher interoceptive accuracy in this population as well. Might the arts in general enhance interoceptive awareness?'

Feeling one's inner state – known as having 'interoceptive ability' – seems to be closely linked to overall emotional awareness, both inwardly and outwardly. Christensen et al. (2017) have argued that while we often think of having five senses (hearing, vision, smell, taste, touch), interoception is a perceptual system that they proffer may be the 'emotional sense'. The authors' findings suggest that dance training might enhance this sense and, indeed, fine-tune it.

Christensen et al. (2017) have outlined empirical evidence for six neural and bio-behavioural functions by which dance might stimulate deeper biological effects:

1. Attentional focus/flow
2. Basic emotional experiences
3. Imagery
4. Communication
5. Self-intimation
6. Social cohesion

By way of example, the authors discuss extreme backbends in dance:

It requires a high level of skill and is usually taught only at advanced levels of any dance. It has many biological benefits because it opens up the biological systems of the front side of the body (e.g., the heart, and the sternum with all its nerve bundles), which are normally compressed by everyday postures, which are mostly slightly forward-leaning. In yogic

and Indian dance traditions, the backbend signifies a glance toward the future and openness. In other dance styles, it is used as a symbol of giving in and of devotion.

(Christensen et al. 2017: 13)

In this way, this genre of freeform movement allows people the effortless opportunity to actually experience a break from the constant, mental chatter and conditioning that are often described as having been accumulated and internalized over the course of one's life. Seen from a neurological perspective, it encourages the actual development, or increased capacity, of new neuro-pathways within a person's brain. It is increasingly evident that the concepts of dance and music wellness are gaining more attention and traction within the wellness industry as viable and leading-edge therapeutic methods that can greatly complement the more common allopathic treatment most prevalent and accessible in the western world (<https://www.globalwellness-summit.com/2020-global-wellness-trends/wellness-music/> Global Wellness Top 10 Wellness Trends).

Ecstatic dance provides participants the opportunity to recognize, experience and get to know the innermost and essential parts of themselves that is often overlooked or forgotten in postmodern living. By helping people to get to know themselves and explore further than an intellectual, cognitive understanding freeform dance provides a non-judgemental environment where people have the opportunity to deliberately elevate their state of being. It is specifically the effortlessness and pleasure of this method designed around an inborn and inherent way of human moving that demonstrates the innateness, function and purposefulness of this elevated state of consciousness.

As earlier stated, this requires no learning of steps or choreography, no props or equipment, no particular clothing or outfit and no predetermined way for one's dance to look. Seen from this perspective, freeform dance pairs the ecstatic experience with healthy and easily accessible methods that people can practice anytime, anywhere, alone or with others, which can help them to:

1. Identify the internal drive to elevation or feeling good,
2. Recognize and sense its existence within themselves,
3. Satisfy the inner need for connection with themselves, others and the world around them in deeper, more meaningful ways.

Elsewhere, in a study on freeform, therapeutic movement, Osbond (2016) identified six movement phases that reflect these experiences: sensing, grounding, expressing, releasing, connecting and completing, 'which allowed for the exploration of character in its developmental sequence, in a music-led wave of energetic charge and discharge' (2016: 130).

Common conditions in facilitation

The facilitator and their team welcome participants individually as they enter the dance space, which can be, for example, a dance studio, a church, a community room or an outdoor area. Next, participants are more formally welcomed into the dance in an opening circle where people gather and either sit or stand in a circle. Here participants introduce themselves one by one, and many times are invited to offer a single word or phrase which reflects how they are feeling in that moment. At that time, the facilitator shares with participants

guidelines for the format of the movement session to follow. Both facilitators and participants hold the dance as ceremonial, in that they feel invited into a sacred space, similar to a religious ceremony at a church. Specifically it is the format/container of the gathering that creates the essence and transforms the overall feeling of the ecstatic dance into a reverential space. These include the following guidelines and invitations.

1. Limited or no talking

This guideline is included specifically and intentionally to remove the non-verbal pressure that can exist in other more mainstream and popular dance environments, where attention is for the most part drawn and even encouraged outwardly by excitement over the feeling of being moved by and the shared recognition of popular songs. This pull of awareness outward does exist in the dance environment that comes to mind when most people think of dancing – over-stimulating habitats designed through the use of bright and constantly moving strobe lights, excessively loud, amplified music and the crowded dance floors, full of people dancing very close together to the point, many times, that it can be challenging to move freely without knocking elbows or stepping on the toes of other dancers.

2. Attention invited inwardly

The invitation to cast one's awareness and actual line of vision downwards is offered to discourage what can be the naturally occurring excitement and inspired glances that usually occur with other dancers. While there is a time and place for both of these more outward-directed elements of dance, the 'medicine' of the dance and sense of grounding or healing along with a pleasurable, uplifted state found in ecstatic dance seem to be cultivated through the encouragement, formal guidelines and sense of 'permission' granted by specifically encouraging an inner-directed journey. In many freeform dance environments, where possible, there is an adjacent space, or the entrance area, where people can take a break from the dance if so desired and feel free to connect with and communicate verbally with each other.

3. Bare feet

This encourages more literal and figurative connection with the ground/earth through the sensation of feeling one's feet in direct contact with the ground – something rarely experienced outside of our homes. In fact, it can be seen as somewhat disrespectful to go sans shoes (no shoes, no shirt, no service! – seen as signs in the front of some stores) as it represents a more primal – as opposed to 'civilized' – version of us as humans beings. In a freeform dance environment, the intention is geared towards helping and even encouraging participants to re-access and re-activate what can be a forgotten or overlooked part of daily living within each of us.

4. Alone-together

Another guideline stated at the beginning of traditional, freeform dances is that the dance to follow is encouraged as primarily a solitary and inward journey. However, if people are 'moved' to come together and dance in a partnership for either a few minutes or the entire time – whether with someone they have never met before or someone they know – then that is of course 'allowed'. The reason

this guideline is simultaneously permitted yet not outwardly encouraged is that participants can tend to feel triggered emotionally seeing two (or more) people connecting in this more intimate, yet non-sexual way or feel conscious that they also 'should' be dancing with others when increased numbers of people are dancing in pairs. All this internal thought and tension that can be triggered by seeing connection-in-motion, so to speak, is thus potentially thought activating and anxiety producing, even if unconsciously. Again, it is not the element of dancing in pairs in and of itself that is discouraged. It is simply that particular element in the context of this specific container that is discouraged because the environment of this more therapeutic type of group dance is intentionally created around deliberately removing distractions, be they one's own thoughts or actions, that might activate distracting thoughts that take a dancer out of their own inner movement journey.

The invitation to engage in this type of dance without specific steps to learn or follow are in line with Halprin's conceptualization of improvisation and the importance she places on creating environments based on on-going encouragement. Halprin's view is that when movement is liberated from 'the constricting armor of stylized, preconceived gestures', an innate feedback process between movement and feeling is generated (Halprin 2000). Thus, through individual, creative self-expression through movement, the freeform movement programme facilitates physical, emotional, psychological and spiritual personal growth. Freeform dance, by its very nature, allows people to experience an effortless, freeing and elevating state of being without having to learn a whole new system of conceptual terms and steps.

The following levels are ones we have noted as a type of sequence most people experience when they (1) experience freeform dance for the first time, (2) feel 'moved' enough to come back to try it again and (3) continue with this genre of movement such that it becomes one of their core and relied-upon self-care, wellness practices.

LEVEL 1: SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS EXISTS AND PRESENT

When people first start attending freeform dances, they mostly remain in the process of experiencing the newness of allowing their bodies to guide them, instead of relying on their minds to be the leader. The mind is learning 'to go on a mini, or, temporary vacation'.

LEVEL 2: SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS NOTICED AND MINIMIZED

Participants feel awareness of and connection with their bodies. They begin to feel the pleasure and effortlessness of the feeling of letting go of the need to think consciously about or guide their movements. This, in turn, allows them to experience more feelings of ease, flow and freedom. They are learning the process of allowing themselves to become spontaneously 'moved' as opposed to moving themselves intentionally.

LEVEL 3: SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS DECREASES OR DISAPPEARS

Self-consciousness no longer pervades and can become replaced by an inner sense of confidence, inner strength and ease that can begin to feel euphoric in its effortlessness. It's an emerging genre of movement that provides individuals the experience of accessing and connecting with what has been described by many dancers as their 'best selves.'

As a young man participating in one of CTM's dances put it:

When I am dancing ecstatically, I feel like I have transcended time-space. It feels like time has stopped while I, in turn, become completely comfortable with the space I am in. I tune into myself in a meditative state while effortlessly sensing into what feels like my expressive and energetic body. Ecstatic dancing is unlike any other dance practice because you are given the freedom to dance with no instruction.

(Sophomore, Colorado University, 2018)

As noted earlier, we have found the concept of 'proprioception' to clarify the nature of this experience of intuitive movement. First advanced in 1906, the term addresses the phenomenon that touch and muscular sensation are intrinsic to the existence of embodied being in a way the other senses are not. In the wider culture – the arts, sport, the psychophysiology of labour and so on – there are many ways in which people have expressed appreciation for the importance of what the anatomist Charles Bell called 'the sixth sense' (Smith 2011). Eight decades ago, Mabel Todd in *The Thinking Body* gave expression to the inherent balance achieved through this sixth sense, i.e. through proprioception, when she wrote:

To have a minimum of stress, and therefore of strain, within the body, not only must the structure as a whole be in balanced relation with the outside forces, (of gravity) but each part must be in balance with every other part within the system. This means that each part must be properly related to every other, remote as well as adjoining, if true mechanical balance is to obtain.

(Todd 1937: 56)

Data has been added to this elusive concept of a sixth sense governing movement and self-awareness. An initial study published in 2016 by scientists at the National Institutes of Health suggests that a gene called *PIEZO2* controls specific aspects of human touch and proprioception, which they describe as 'a "sixth sense" describing awareness of one's body in space' (Chesler et al. 2016). Thus, spontaneity is the first step towards connecting with one's own form of expressing joy through movement and is the most recognizable element encouraged in ecstatic dance.

THE CENTER FOR TRANSFORMATIVE MOVEMENT

Bringing the therapeutic benefits of dance back to the daylight... and into the public realm: Where the people are

Based upon both the overall experience gained through offering movement-related events curated over the past twenty years and that which participants have shared, the authors have documented the following:

- People seem to be wanting to come together in a new way, through movement, music and community. Other than large sporting events and rock concerts, as well as dancing in the club scene, there appear to be very few types of events where people can come together as a community, especially around meaningful activities that engender authentic connection.

- This type of movement is referred to by different names by different groups of people – freeform, ecstatic dance, conscious dance, trance dance, ‘the kind I do at a wedding’, ‘out at a club’, or most often heard as ‘what I do in my kitchen!’
- What all the names for this type of dance have in common is that there are no steps to learn and no teacher to follow other than a facilitator who lightly guides the process, encouraging participants to let themselves go and follow what feels right to them in the moment while in motion.
- The concepts and the actual words the authors use at many of their dances include ‘You can’t get it wrong’ and ‘Your way is the right way!’ seem to greatly assist people in trusting, some for the very first time, that their actual physical body can and will take the lead when given the opportunity and sense of ‘permission’.

The notion of ‘you can’t get it wrong’

The freeform dance programme that the authors have researched and published in the past was developed by the first author of this article, Lisa Fasullo, founder of The Center for Transformative Movement (CTM) in Boulder, Colorado. Fasullo and her team think of CTM as a movement laboratory which was established as a hub for promoting greater awareness of the transformative, whole-self, wellness benefits of somatic movement in the form of freeform and ecstatic dance.

In addition to many on-going, freeform dance events, projects and research work, they next share the example of one of their community events to demonstrate ways in which CTM and Fasullo are creating and intentionally constructing this association – between wellness and freeform dance. The relationship of dance and wellness is for many in American society as well as within CTM’s specific community a new association.

In partnership with the City of Boulder, which recognizes CTM’s leadership in the area of dance wellness and also values the health benefits of people dancing together in the community, Fasullo and her team create annual, eight-week, Monday evening, summertime, community-wide, group dances offered free of charge to the community in Central Park – a large downtown historical gathering spot in Boulder, Colorado. As the dances take place at one of Boulder’s most visited landmarks – a large lighted amphitheatre in Central Park – CTM named the dances Bandshell Boogie accordingly and add an accompanying wellness-related theme each year such as Bringing Dance to where the People Are, Bringing Dance Back to the Daylight and Dance Makes You Feel Good.

In addition to partnering with the city to bring forth the dances, CTM partners with various, local, mental health and wellness organizations whose brochures and suicide hotline cards CTM offers at their hospitality tent at the dances under the area of ‘Mental Wellness Resources/Dance Makes you Feel Good’. Thus, pairing in people’s consciousness, that specific and intentional association of dance and wellness such that more people will begin thinking about dance as an activity that can help them feel good, physically, emotionally, socially and attitudinally.

What is unique about these weekly, Monday evening dances – established in 2016, running consecutively for two months every summer 7.00–9.30 p.m. and consistently attracting upwards of 300 people of all ages and walks of

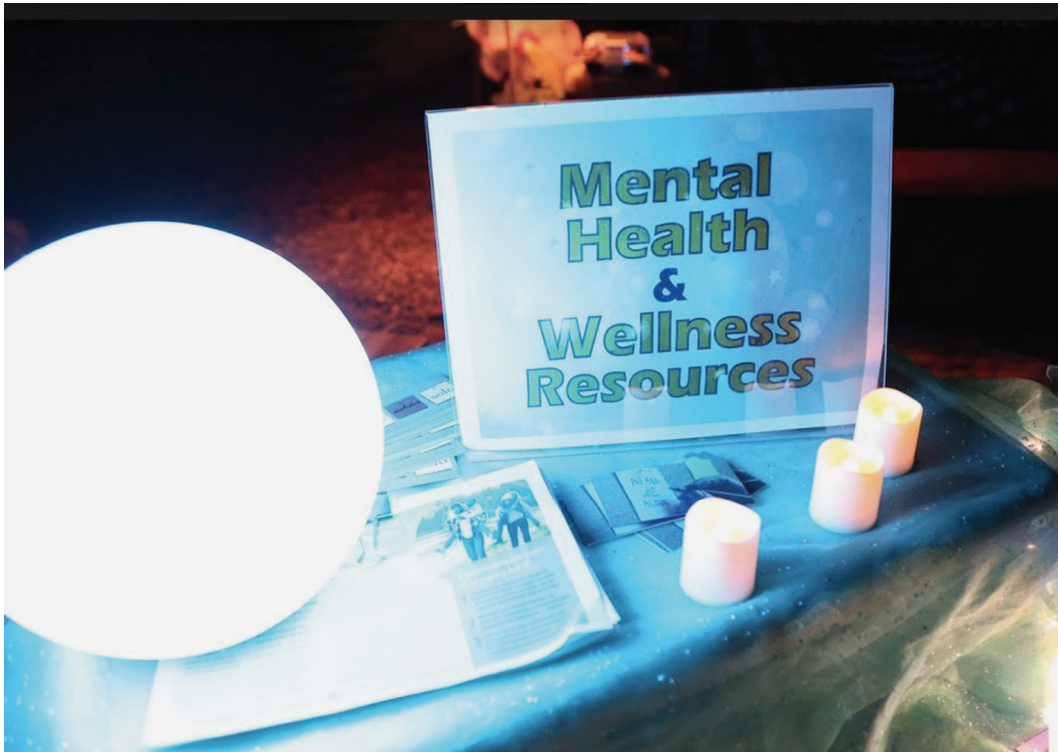


Figure 5: Displays at the hospitality tent strengthening and reinforcing the feel-good association between freeform dance, health and wellness at a large CTM event. Photograph by Erik Lasko.

life – is twofold. First, they provide a healthy activity free of charge that many in the community already love and pay to do on a regular basis. Simultaneously, and more important to CTM’s mission, the dances provide a safe, welcoming and fun environment that encourages those who might not be able to afford to attend a dance class, or equally, those who might have avoided dance their whole lives out of fear of looking foolish, something Fasullo and her team repeatedly hear from people to dance. Oppositely, these groups who have not had much experience with dance, for whatever reason, have come to know the welcoming feeling they receive at these large social gatherings. Second, the outdoor, festive and intergenerational dances expand public awareness, making this genre of movement literally more visible to both participants as well as those driving by when the community at large sees large groups of people dancing and enjoying themselves. Many people report that it was seeing the dances passing by in their cars the week before that got them to the dance. Said simply, an as of yet unknown, dance, wellness genre is emerging intentionally created to be easily accessible and affordable to community members on a regular and consistent basis.

People often share sentiments like the following quote from a 58-year-old man at one of the Bandshell Boogie events, who reported that not only had he never danced before – he had actively never wanted to dance before. He shares incredulously in a joyous, sweaty and out-of-breath kind of way during one of the large community-wide free dances amongst 300+ participants:

Hey, my wife has tried to get me on the dance floor for over 20 years! I just danced ... and danced pretty hard ... for the last 45 minutes and I loved it! What is all this ... and who are all these people? How do they all know about this? We were just walking by. Who are you guys, what is this? I never knew this was a thing. It's so much fun. Where can I do it again?'

Consistent and repeated examples like this participant's account – introducing people who would never before have entered a dance studio to letting go in this way – inspires Fasullo and her CTM team to continue channelling their energies and resources into annually producing the popular and well-attended summer-long dance series free of charge. Monetizing the event has not been a priority, and CTM has devoted considerable resources to its continuation.

INTRODUCING NEW PEOPLE TO THE 'MOVEMENT' MOVEMENT

The Bandshell Boogie weekly dances have the added benefit of being very visible in a high-traffic area of town, where both drivers and pedestrians pass by the lighted Bandshell amphitheatre and cannot help but hear and feel the sound of the deep-bass, musical beats emanating out of the huge speakers or the sight of hundreds of bodies moving creatively in a large group. There is adjacent outdoor-style theatre seating, so people are welcome to sit and take in the positive energy of the dance, whether they decide to dance or not. This high visibility, built-in comfort and weekly continuity have the added benefit of introducing and offering the following:



Figure 6: A young woman feeling 'moved' to express herself by dancing outside with the 'Dance Makes you Feel Good' sign prominently positioned in the background expanding awareness of the wellness benefits of Freeform / Ecstatic Dance at a large community dance offered by The Center for Transformative Movement in Boulder, Colorado. Photograph by Erik Lasko.

1. Passers-by who do not consider themselves dancers see dance going on regularly in their community.
2. It offers a friendly, welcoming 'street-fair with music and dancing' environment for all ages and walks of life.
3. It offers a non-intimidating way to be around dancing without feeling the pressure to dance for those who have not danced before.
4. It is a place where people new to dance can let go, let loose and dance freely, many for the first time, surprised at their lack of self-consciousness of which they may have thought they had, due to being blended in with hundreds of others dancing away in a care-free, friendly way.
5. It is a walkable place to socialize for those community members who are reliant on others for their transportation – senior citizens and middle schoolers – and who might not have many opportunities to feel connection with the larger community in which they live. People are relaxed, open, receptive, at ease and present with a sense of joy reveling in the spirit of dancing with hundreds of other smiling strangers, many of whom become new friends.

Anecdotal accounts from participants repeatedly attest to the power of this practice. People report 'falling in love' with the practice, which encourages



Figure 7: Closing Circle at BANDSHELL BOOGIE, where the microphone is passed around the circle and community members have the opportunity to share a word or a short reflection of their dance experience that evening. Photograph by Will Way Media.

group and community engagement while leaving the individual in a happy, peaceful and satisfied state of well-being.

Another participant noted months after the dances had ended:

I was a little nervous at first because I came alone and didn't know anyone. I danced with everyone, no one in particular, yet didn't talk with anyone there. And so, of course I haven't talked to anyone since then. Yet, I can't tell you how connected I felt. The whole time. I remember walking home feeling on top of the world with that wonderful feeling of being connected to everything [...] and especially part of something epic and larger than myself. All without any verbal connection, only non-verbal movement and connection.

Graphic Designer, 37

DISCUSSION

Cultural traditions across geographies and millennia have recognized the existence and importance of elevated, ecstatic states as definers of a unique state of the human condition: one lived in balance, social connectedness and inner fulfilment and with increasing growth towards wisdom and compassion. Psychological theories of the twentieth century have framed western thought and eastern knowledge systems into hierarchies of human development that have been developed beyond self-actualization to a state of transcendental being, representing the same characteristics as those delineated by traditions in the millennia before them.



Figure 8: Two University of Colorado students in the flow dancing, amongst 300+ people enjoying the positive energy at one of the weekly BANDSHELL BOOGIE events offered annually all summer long by The Center for Transformative Movement's in Boulder, Colorado. Photograph by Erik Lasko.

Somatic theory has been an important influence in the use of dance as therapy. In her 1937 work *The Thinking Body*, Columbia University professor Mabel Todd wrote: '[i]t is possible to bring the organic impressions [of the unconscious] and resulting movements into consciousness and thus to control the adjustments.' Subsequently, Todd's work led to the development of the body awareness practice called ideokinesis, which was incorporated within the dance programme at The Julliard School. Comparing various systems of somatic movement across time, culture and paradigm, Kelly Mullan (2014) observes:

While the approaches evolved and changed over time, the underlying philosophy has continually supported the 'whole person' as an integral being able to self-actualize. This self-actualization is dependent on the direct bodily experience of therapeutic and educational movement and available practices are a result of the evolution of somatics.

(Mullan 2014)

Twenty-first-century neuroscience has shown evidence of brain changes – coherence, new connectivity, increased grey and white matter – in people who regularly experience these elevated states via a range of different pathways. With dance, not only is grey and white matter increased in dancers' brains over time but the brain's meaning areas are developed in ways not seen with other forms of movement and exercise. And, as we have highlighted, new research has identified a locus and firing pattern for the area of the brain associated with spiritual experience that is quite independent of religious belief. This concept of spiritual, yet not religious, echoes the approach and intention of ecstatic dance.

As noted in the Introduction, lack of social connectedness is a core driver of mental un-wellness resulting in people reaching for an elixir or antidote to their own uncomfortable, painful and unmanageable emotional states of being. As elevated states are known and have been shown to change human experience and brain structure and function, it can be argued that an absence of means to activate these experiences and enhance brain capacity is a major underlying deficit contributing to such social concerns as social isolation, addiction, increased levels of mental illness and suicide.

The incapacity to satisfy an instinctive, innate human drive for higher experiences may be as elemental as not being able to satisfy the impulses of hunger and thirst leading to a form of psychological and emotional malnutrition. Without a key to unlock and mobilize areas of brain activity and potential that lead to elevated states, other keys become substitutes, such as alcohol, drugs and opioids. Yet, perversely, they produce the opposite effect – closing down access to these experiences and injuring rather than enhancing the brain's capacity.

FREEFORM DANCE AS A NEW PATH TO THE EXPERIENCE OF YOGA

It is noteworthy that this re-emerging and re-energizing ancient practice of freeform dance is rapidly becoming considered the next generation of the mind/body connection and metaphorically 'the next yoga' in its equivalence as a health-generating practice and as a trend currently being noted within the research and wellness sectors. Like yoga, participants report feeling more elevated and energized, both during and after they dance, as well as having a renewed sense of aliveness and openness both inwardly toward themselves

and outwardly towards others. Furthermore, they report pleasurable feelings of oneness and connection with the world around them. The cultivation of the renewed feelings one comes to experience through regularly practicing freeform dance can, similar to the practice of yoga, cumulatively become incorporated as a sense of ease, flow and general well-being in all areas of one's life.

As did the practice of yoga circa 25 years ago, freeform dance is today bringing to the mainstream demographics of society the awareness of and attention to *our innate, albeit repressed drive, desire and ability to express ourselves creatively and outwardly*. In this way, freeform group dance is an invaluable tool to help people transmute and transform mounting stress into vitality, exuberance and a desired resourceful state.

From a systemic perspective, the re-emergence of freeform and ecstatic dance can be observed from large-group dynamics to smaller-group community gatherings. From the societal/cultural perspective to the community and grassroots application, we see this transmutation in movements such as Matthew Fox's Cosmic Mass and Gabriel Roth's format of the 5 Rhythms. Higher educational circles such as universities have begun to offer freeform dance in the form of movement meditations as a health and wellness modality. Whether offered as dance temples, movement masses, a class, a recreation centre, or at newly-emerging, large, community gatherings, this form of movement is moving into the public realm.

By naming, researching and inviting the exploration of this innate, human impulse, we foresee the likely possibility of a support infrastructure arising organically – providing the necessary tools, methods and means to guide individuals to pursue this path of self-care and well-being. In other words, a dynamic industry has the possibility of arising around ecstatic dance similar to the development to what has become the flourishing yoga industry. In doing this, it paves the way for a contemporary version of modern-day, cultural practices intended to elevate the innate, ecstatic state in people of all ages and walks of life. This is the revival of an ancient practice noted across cultures and throughout time.

On a practical level, this will facilitate sanctioned, healthy, safe and effective ways for people to attain elevated states, connect with each other and feel good. Globally, the revival of this ancient practice - noted across cultures and throughout time - into a modernized version now being recognized and identified as a fitness and mental wellness practice – shows many signs of already establishing itself within the conventional demographics of modern, western culture. This emergence brings with it unlimited potential for the development and creation of its own accompanying sub-industries – parallel to the many built around and supportive of the practice of yoga. Ultimately, this newly forming infrastructure will broaden the selection of wellness modalities available today and in so doing contribute to the expansion of the global wellness economy and in turn, the larger sustainability of public health.

It is an idea whose time has come, and the authors look forward to writing future articles on what they predict will be a major, global revival and trend with revolutionary implications for freeform dance and bringing people together in new, positive and unprecedented ways.

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