

# Buddhist Psychology Intersects with Dance Movement Therapy

## 佛教心理学与舞蹈动作治疗的交汇

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### Abstract

This article highlights the potential role of the “brahmaviharas,” a Buddhist concept which emphasizes certain spiritual dimensions and have been interlinked with dance movement therapy combined with other expressive arts, in responding effectively to the unpredictable life changes during pandemic situations such as the COVID-19. A multiple therapeutic–expressive–creative movement sequence model and meditation practices were collaboratively developed by movement therapist Tripura Kashyap and expressive arts therapy practitioner Anubha Doshi to address each of the brahmaviharas: loving–kindness (*mettā*), compassion (*karuṇā*), sympathetic joy (*muditā*), and equanimity (*upekkhā*). This article specifically reveals how the embodiment of concepts from Buddhism through movement can help in concretizing and embedding meditative practices in the mind–body continuum. Finally, the article explores the relevance of practicing the brahmaviharas by utilizing specifically crafted movement rituals, such as body preparatory routines, mindful movement, body scans, embodiment, gratitude rituals, interspersed with visual art and the use of props to focus on enhancing people’s resilience, mental health, and well-being. All these experiences were creatively adapted to the virtual medium during the COVID-19 pandemic period.

**Keywords:** Dance movement therapy (DMT), COVID-19, Buddhist psychology, brahmaviharas, therapeutic movement rituals, expressive arts

### 摘要

本文强调了“四梵住(Brahmaviharas)”的潜在作用，“四梵住”是一个强调某些特定精神层面的佛教概念，与舞蹈动作治疗经验和其他表达性艺术相关联，可以有效地应对诸如新冠病毒(COVID-19)大流行情况下不可预测的生活变动。舞蹈动作治疗师Tripura Kashyap和表达性艺术治疗师Anubha Doshi合作开发了多种治疗性-表达性-创造性的动作序列模式与冥想练习，以回应四梵住：慈-(*mettā*)、悲(*karuṇā*)、喜(*muditā*)和舍(*upekkhā*)四种心境。本文特别揭示了通过动作具身化佛教的概念可以如何促进人类身心连续体的冥想实践具体化，并深入体验。最后，文章探讨了运用特定的动作仪式实践四梵住的重要性，如一套身体预备动作、正念动作、身体扫描、具身化、感恩仪式，并且穿插视觉艺术，运用道具来专注于提升人们的复原力、心理健康和幸福感。在新冠病毒(COVID-19)大流行期间，我们创造性地调整了所有这些体验，以适用于虚拟媒介。

**关键词:** 舞蹈动作治疗 (DMT), 新冠病毒 (COVID-19), 佛教心理学, 四梵住(Brahmaviharas), 治疗性动作仪式, 表达性艺术

## Introduction

The American Dance Therapy Association (ADTA), the world's first official dance movement therapy (DMT) association, formed in 1966, defined DMT as “the psychotherapeutic use of movement to promote emotional, social, cognitive and physical integration of the individual, for the purpose of improving health and well-being.” DMT helps to unlock our capacity to move freely and spontaneously; we develop our personal movement language to identify, acknowledge, and release buried or blocked feelings, thoughts and memories through our bodies. This is typically carried out through five stages of therapeutic encounters: movement seeding, movement expression, movement exploration, resolution, and integration.

DMT as a therapeutic modality can be used with people with anxiety (Ritter & Low, 1996). It improves body image, body consciousness, self-body schema, and mental representations of obese patients aside from improving the psychosocial aspects of their personality (Muller-Pinget et al., 2012). Further, through shared movement experiences, DMT can contribute to the development of resilience (Payne et al., 2019). Currently, the world continues to face a huge global health crisis due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The recurring lockdowns have brought forth a need to maintain physical–social distance, confining most of us in our homes, with a whirlpool of overwhelming emotions in juxtaposition with a sense of detachment and dissociation. However, the pandemic has also helped us perceive how important people around us really are by providing support structures to us in more ways than one. During such challenging times, certain concepts from Buddhist psychology, blended with DMT, have offered a large canvas for self-healing using movement rituals that go well beyond meditation and in fact reinforce the quality of meditation.

The term “Buddhist psychology” was coined by Caroline Rhys Davids in her 1900 *Buddhist Manual of Psychological Ethics*. It is also embedded within the greater Buddhist ethical and philosophical system all over Asia and the rest of the world. Buddhism originated in India and spread to several Asian countries such as China, Japan, Indonesia, Thailand, Burma, and others. Buddha is said to have continued to cultivate the “brahmaviharas” throughout his years of learning and the development of meditation practices. In recent years, there has been an incorporation of Buddhism and Buddhist psychology in various fields of psychotherapy both in the western and eastern hemispheres of the Earth. Meditative practices rooted in Buddhism have been integrated into the treatment of a variety of mental health problems and has clinical applications too, for instance, as mindfulness-based cognitive therapy for relapse prevention of depression (Segal et al., 2002) and treatment for generalized anxiety disorder (Roemer & Orsillo, 2002). Furthermore, studies have shown that during the COVID-19 pandemic, daily mindfulness practices helped lead a tranquil and content life (Sinha et al., 2020). However, the field of DMT is yet to perceive and acknowledge

the significance of integrating brahmavihara practices to enhance mental health and well-being in such challenging times.

### Brahmaviharas

The term “brahmavihara,” or sublime attitudes, literally means the “dwelling place of Brahmas (the divine)” and is differently titled by various authors across different eras: “Four Immeasurables,” “Four Divine Abidings,” “Four Divine Abodes,” or “Four Illimitables.” These were Buddha’s primary teachings related specifically to feelings that are believed to have originated in our heart. According to the brahmavihara practice, love, empathy, compassion, or kindness is directed toward oneself and also especially toward other sentient beings. In the profoundly wise words of Rabindranath Tagore (Indian Nobel laureate in literature), brahmaviharas enable the transition from egolessness to a universalization of consciousness, from “limited” to “unlimited love” (Vohra, 2019).

The “Four Immeasurables” break barriers between the self and the other by providing practices to decrease the inordinately self-centered mind (Miller, 1979). Thich Nhat Hahn, a renowned Buddhist monk and teacher, articulates that these four “Divine Abodes” are considered immeasurable because the more one reflects on and contemplates upon them, the more one applies these practices to one’s life. The four brahmaviharas constitute the heart of Buddhist ethics (Hofmann et al., 2011). The following virtues are considered to be antidotes that counter the negative qualities such as greed, hatred, and delusion:

1. Loving kindness (*mettā*): Deliberately cultivating and developing the quality of universal and selfless love toward all beings without selecting or excluding anyone. It primes a person’s ability to empathize with others and leads to prosocial behaviour aimed at decreasing others’ suffering.
2. Compassion (*karuṇā*): A specific state of mind that can be singled out and cultivated by concentration and absorption. It is about intentionally developing an attitude of compassion that meets the experience of suffering with the genuine wish for all beings to be safe, secure, and healed of their afflictions. The life of others is often much harder than ours; compassion reconciles us to our own destiny by showing us this reality. It opens the doors of freedom and makes the narrow heart wider.
3. Sympathetic joy (*mudītā*): The quality of the heart–mind that responds positively to the good fortune of others with happiness and goodwill rather than with jealousy or envy. Did you never notice how joy rouses men to noble aspirations and deeds, exceeding their normal capacity? Did not such an experience fill your own heart with joyful bliss? It is in your power to increase such experience of sympathetic joy, by producing happiness in others, by bringing them joy and solace (Thera, 1999).
4. Equanimity (*upekkhā*): An unshakable balance of the mind. It is not a detachment due to distancing oneself from the worldly phenomenon nor a desensitized neutrality of feeling; rather, it is an advanced “state of being” that is able to embrace both pleasant and unpleasant experiences of different situations in our

lives. Buddhists believe that the radical transformation of consciousness necessary to realize *Sukha* - a state of flourishing that arises from mental balance and insight into the true nature of reality (Ekman et al., 2005) can occur by sustained training in attention, emotional balance, and mindfulness. The ideal situation here is not simply to achieve one's own individual happiness in isolation from others, but to incorporate the recognition of one's deep kinship with all sentient beings, who share the same desire to be free of suffering.

## **Therapeutic–expressive–creative Movement Sequence Model**

### **Background**

The authors of the research, Tripura Kashyap and Anubha Doshi, conceptualized the idea of integrating the brahmaviharas with mainstream DMT. They have been practicing Buddhism and have been movement and expressive arts therapy practitioners in India for many years, incorporating Asian philosophies in their work. Certain concepts from Buddhist psychology were interwoven to layer and formulate a holistic movement therapy model with multiple movement experiences addressing each of the brahmaviharas in relation to leading more balanced lives.

As part of the Soulsphere and Creative Movement Therapy Association of India collaboration, a two-day workshop, titled “Buddhist psychology intersects with dance movement therapy,” was organized. This was facilitated by the authors who conducted four sessions of two hours each, twice during 2020–2021, with a different set of participants for both workshops. These were eight-hour workshops each time. Sessions were structured by beginning with a breath practice, a mindfulness-based awareness meditation, and a body preparatory warm-up, followed by movement building, before addressing the brahmaviharas. In every two-hour session, each of the four brahmaviharas was covered, beginning with a sitting meditation and related movement experiences followed by a ritual of closure. Throughout each session, the flow of body movements were meshed with verbal reflection and theoretical inputs to examine certain core beliefs and values of Buddhism in an in-depth manner. The authors (considering the limitations of online sessions) used a blend of different constellations with participants working individually or in pairs, triads or quartets, and in breakout rooms, to articulate themselves via collective and solo dance studies. The idea was also to encourage them, post-workshop, to integrate movement rituals into their daily life. All sessions were recorded for research and academic purposes.

### **Participants**

The total number of participants was 24, and they were recruited through convenience sampling (those who joined the workshop voluntarily). The participants were predominantly female, with age ranging from 25 to 60 years. They belonged to middle and upper-middle-class income families residing in different parts of India, Asia, and Europe. The group also included one research participant, Karishma Arora (a co-author of this research).

## **Movement Meditation**

Tripura Kashyap, one of the authors shared that “Initially when I came across Buddhism and its in-depth meditation practices, I would find it difficult to calm down my restless mind, sit still and meditate. Therefore, I used movement patterns (inspired by dance therapy experiences) across space or in the same zone, in silence or to a piece of atmospheric music. This movement transition helped me gradually center myself and move into developing a calm body–mind state a little more easily, and experience the meditative feeling that was usually achieved by sitting practices. For example, when I slowly rocked back and forth, sideways, and made circles or oscillated my upper body (all this accompanied by breath) and came to a point of stillness, it prepared me to sit in peace, pay attention to my thoughts, sensations and feelings and be in the moment” Therefore, this “rocking body meditation” was used as an entry point for participants in the workshop too. They moved their bodies very slowly in different pre-decided directions, first in silence with internal counting and breathing, later accompanied by non-rhythmic music of an “Alaap” played on a sitar (an Indian string instrument). As participants memorized and repeated this movement meditation, they shared that it became easier for them to sit still and take ten long inhalations and exhalations without getting distracted by random thoughts.

## **Brahmavihara Sitting Practices**

Anubha Doshi, one of the authors shared, “Being a dancer, when I first started meditating, I found it hard to sit for long periods of time. Over time I noticed that if I had moved previously or done art work it was easier for me to enter a meditative space - it felt like a window opening in my subconscious mind and as though movement was essential for the body to release pent up energy or toxins before I could sit for meditation. I realized that if we are sitting to meditate with our thoughts scattering in different directions simultaneously, then we receive fewer benefits from the meditation.” The movement and other expressive art forms help us get in touch with a felt sense which is an internal bodily awareness that arises when our awareness increases with such practices.

Mindfulness and Buddhist practices are an integral part of modern Vipassana meditation retreats across Asia, which lay emphasis on the observation of bodily sensations, feelings, and thoughts. The Vipassana experience shatters dualism and replaces it with a revolutionary vision of the unity of mind–body and its role in the unconscious origins of the sense of self. Every thought has a specific sensation connected to it. Every bodily sensation is connected to a thought. Once we have established meditative mindfulness, we can directly observe the manner in which our thoughts become embodied (Fleischman, 2012).

Anubha Doshi articulates. “It was most exciting for me to re-discover the mind-body connection in Buddhism, since my primary work in dance therapy and expressive arts therapy focused on the same concept, that of the body-mind nexus. I found parallels and correlations, between both the therapeutic systems, as we turned our attention to the body. During the sitting practices, one is not deliberately

evoking anything or doing any active movement. In stillness and silence, one notices the sensations arising on their own, and there is no reaction or judgement, only a witnessing attitude. In expressive arts and movement therapies, meanwhile, one shares an aesthetic response to what is showing up. There are various schools or methodologies popularized by different DMT practitioners. I find the body–mind centering and somatic practices closest to this philosophy. Vipassana focuses on the interconnection between the mind and the body. This got me thinking about bringing together both the healing modalities—dance therapy and Buddhist practices, while observing and exploring how they could build resilience, especially during times like the Covid-19 pandemic, which originated in Wuhan, China and became a worldwide threat.”

What also makes Buddhist practices relevant to today’s times is the neuroscience-based research in the field by Dr Richard J. Davidson, who works closely with the Dalai Lama, to bring this ancient wisdom and its benefits to the forefront. Davidson coined the four areas that contribute to well-being based on Buddhist practices: awareness, connection, insight, and purpose. Each dimension is central to well-being and has neural and biological underpinnings (Dahl et al., 2020).

### **Movement Building**

The brahmavihara segment in each session was preceded by ‘movement building’ to expand the range of motion in the participants’ bodies. Through this, those who had not moved much before felt comfortable in their bodies to express themselves, to get into a meditative movement trance or immerse themselves in creative experiences through movement. They moved different body parts in isolation, followed by moving the whole body as a unit. They used small and large movements while travelling across space relating to different sites and objects in their rooms. The movement building segment ended with participants also letting various parts of their bodies speak to each other through improvisation and explorative movement.

### **Loving Kindness (*mettā*)**

The first brahmavihara theme that we worked on was “loving kindness” (*mettā*), in which participants expressed love and kindness toward themselves and other people from their lives. We began with a movement improvisation in which participants were first requested to develop a relationship with the chair that they usually sat on. They had to move the chair in a variety of ways and move their bodies in relation to the chair (almost like moving with a partner.) This later helped them perceive the chair as a container for different people from their lives, including themselves. This sequence was interspersed with the guided *metta* meditation practice with the following phrases:

“May I be happy”

“May you be happy”

“May all be happy”

After the movement segments, participants verbally shared what it felt like to embody and concretize the expression of love toward themselves and others in their lives.

Loving kindness involves both wishes and feelings, in your brain, so it mobilizes prefrontal language and intention networks as well as limbic emotion and reward networks (Hanson & Mendius, 2009).

### **Sympathetic Joy (*muditā*)**

The second brahmavihara, “sympathetic joy” (*muditā*), began with a sitting meditation practice, after which participants created artwork of events that brought joy to their lives. Keeping these images in mind, they later moved and danced around the room recognizing, expressing and releasing the myriad variations of joy. This was followed by “authentic movement,” in pairs in breakout rooms, in which one person moved and expressed the feeling of joy. The partner witnessed and attempted to be on the same journey as the mover, feeling the other’s joy and being happy. During verbal reflection between partners, both shared what it meant to embody and feel happy for each other’s joys instead of only their own.

Altruistic joy opens the heart, helps create a positive connection to the wider world, and strengthens and deepens relationships (Hanson & Mendius, 2009). Happiness for others is an antidote to bitter comparisons and helps overcome jealousy.

### **Compassion (*karuṇā*)**

While addressing the third brahmavihara of “compassion” (*karuṇā*), the facilitators invited the participants to experience a guided compassion practice and then led them through a sequence of verbal–physical synchronized movement sequence (words, body movements, and hand gestures) related to self-compassion. This was followed by imagining and creating rings of compassion around themselves with their hand gestures.

Compassion can be defined as a deep concern for the suffering of others and also for one’s own suffering. Compassion is supported by recalling the feeling of being with someone who loves you, evoking gratitude, being empathetic, and wishing for others to be free from any kind of suffering. Compassion draws on the anterior cingulate cortex and insula. Through cultivating compassion, which is evoked by guided meditations, one strengthens the circuitry in these brain regions (Hanson & Mendius, 2009).

### **Equanimity (*upekkhā*)**

The fourth brahmavihara began with a guided sitting meditation, in which participants witnessed their thoughts arising and diffusing while getting in touch with the impermanent nature of things - one of the core Buddhist teachings. Following this, participants were led through a body preparatory exercise in which they paid attention to different parts of the body (moving each in isolation), while trying to recognize and acknowledge what they felt or thought about each of them - biased, neutral, pleasant,

unpleasant, like, dislike, and so on. Later they collectively explored the kind of ‘body attitude’ they had cultivated toward different parts of their bodies over the years through verbal reflection and movement.

At the end of this exercise, they also thanked and gave gratitude to each body part while developing equanimity toward their body as a whole by moving it as a unified entity. This was followed by a poetic rendition of *The Guest House* by Rumi to which participants created a group movement sequence as an aesthetic response to the feelings that the poem evoked.

The ancient circuitry of the brain is continually driving one to react one way or another - equanimity is the circuit breaker. It is an unusual brain state, it is not based on the prefrontal inhibition of the limbic system, but rather on not reacting to it. This draws on four neural conditions: prefrontal and anterior cingulate cortex activation for understanding and intention; steadiness of mind, driven initially by anterior cingulate cortex oversight but then self-organizing; fast gamma-wave entrainment of large areas of the brain to create the mental experience of great spaciousness; parasympathetic activation, to dampen the limbic/sympathetic nervous system/hypothalamic–pituitary–adrenal axis feedback loops, that would make the stress response system react to its own reactions in vicious cycles (Hanson & Mendius, 2009).

## Discussion

Based on the participants’ verbal reflections, which were documented in great detail, along with written feedback collected after the sessions, the majority of them had become aware of a variety of emotions experienced during the sessions. One of them expressed that she did not think she had got a chance to ponder on these feelings and emotions in so much depth, within a group setting discussion before. Another participant described it as, “a range of emotions dealing with tiredness as well as with uplifting vibrations.” Besides emotions, the movement sequence model also brought awareness to the felt sensations in the physical body throughout the meditative practices in the session. As one of them reflected, during meditation, in the initial moments, the mind was out of its leash and the body was racing - especially the stomach, but the movements gave her more focus.

In addition, each participant observed that the brahmaviharas, when expressed through creative movement, helped them internalize and feel each other’s energies and create their personal movement language without judgement. A participant shared that the sitting practices, with the feet rooted to the earth and experiencing sensations alongside body movements and connecting to various body parts was very calming and meditative for her. Another reflection by a participant revealed that the incorporation of movement made meditation a much deeper and lasting experience. The sitting practice and movement improvisation complemented each other, especially during the unified body movement sequence, ending with the poem by Rumi she articulated.

The sessions offered select movement capsules inspired by Buddhist principles to enhance one’s internal awareness, while strengthening the mind–body continuum. Body and self-awareness activities were layered by inter and intra-personal attunement practices, imbued by kinesthetic empathy. The idea was that the grounding and

centering movement experiences from DMT would strengthen the mental and physical focus to get a deeper experience during body scans and mindful movement practices, which would also enhance one's sensory awareness.

Movement improvisation was used as a tool to release daily residual life stresses and bring out different movement qualities that helped internalize each brahmavihara better. Movement metaphors that symbolize and express resilience were explored using props, body shapes, and sculpture work to relate and integrate the philosophy embedded in the brahmavihara concept into one's life, to help examine one's personality traits, to better one's relationships and acknowledge and recall personal stories. In gratitude rituals, traditional mudras (hand gestures), from Indian classical dances, were used to acknowledge small as well as the big events in life that one was grateful for and to help embody the Buddha nature within oneself and to retain individuality and authenticity while interacting with others.

The sessions helped the participants become calmer and more open-hearted; they experienced heightened self-awareness, centeredness, and groundedness; and they deepened their orientation toward the positive qualities of the brahmaviharas. One participant shared the value of self-exploration that she gained from the session as, "self as 'knowing' that is authentic, core and true."

These findings are backed by neuroscience, where research on monks showed that they were able to voluntarily regulate brain activity through purely mental processes in the functional magnetic resonance imaging and electroencephalogram scans set up by Dr. Richardson. Electroencephalogram recordings of monks showed a dramatic increase in electrical activity known as gamma waves in the left frontal lobes (the left middle frontal gyrus), a zone that is a locus of positive emotions. This indicates that as we practice compassion for others, there is a dramatic increase in our own personal well-being (Gilsinan, 2015). Studies, including one from their laboratory, show that compassion training, in which one generates positive wishes for another being, primes a person's ability to empathize with others and leads to prosocial behavior aimed at decreasing others' suffering.

"COVID times call for such healing practices - because when one cannot change the situation around you, you need to change it within you, and that's what this workshop for me was all about. Meditation and movement practices gave us a sense of belonging, they strengthened us and kept us going," said Hina, a participant, who felt connected with all the brahmaviharas and enjoyed equanimity (*upekkhā*) and loving kindness (*mettā*), in particular. Another participant, who had an insightful and comforting experience, found that movement and art practices deepened the brahmavihara practices and sitting practices in turn aided the movement experiences. Further, it helped in feeling at ease both physically and mentally. Yet another participant, Ankita, shared in her feedback that, "Such practices can be a beautiful way of complementing therapy along with the treatments for chronic illnesses/cancer, as they serve as a toolbox, and with regular repetition of them they will help me in coping with overwhelming situations like the COVID-19."

The subjective experiences of the participants proved that the "therapeutic-expressive-creative" movement sequence model has the potential to help people cope

with adversity and build resilience by responding effectively to unpredictable life changes (adaptability).

Finally, the feedback responses revealed that most of the participants were able to practice, resonate and connect the most with equanimity (*upekkhā*), followed by compassion (*karuṇā*), loving kindness (*mettā*), and sympathetic joy (*muditā*).

## Conclusion

The research was aimed at integrating Buddhist meditations, especially the brahmaviharas, with the therapeutic movement experiences, to help participants recognize, acknowledge, and express their thoughts and feelings through movement meditation as well as attune to their sense of kinesthetic empathy and self-expression. Besides, the movement experiences were designed to contribute positively to an individual's or groups' mental and emotional well-being during the entire period of COVID-19.

The response statements of participants indicated the successful impact of the movement sequence model, as it suggested that the integration of such therapeutic movement routines in daily life would enhance well-being and offer the participants a means for building resilience, developing self-care rituals, enhancing heightened attunement (within the self, with others and with the environment) and strengthening the mind–body connection.

There were also certain limitations in relation to the current study. With this approach, we gathered subjective experiences of participants in a small group; hence, the results cannot be generalized to DMT sessions with clinical clients. There is a need to explore further whether the findings would remain relevant in the clinical context. Hence, the present study should be considered as a developmental study. The “therapeutic–expressive–creative” movement sequence model, which engages with the brahmaviharas and lays emphasis on certain spiritual dimensions, interlinked with DMT experiences and other expressive arts, holds great promise and thus could definitely be repeated within the clinical context with a large sample of participants.

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## Declaration of conflicting interest

We declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Tripura Kashyap pioneered movement therapy in India in 1990 and co-founded the Creative Movement Therapy Association of India (CMTAI) in 2014. She teaches on the Certificate, PG Diploma and MA-level dance therapy courses across India. She trained

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