

# Dancing with Dharma



ESSAYS ON MOVEMENT AND DANCE  
IN WESTERN BUDDHISM



# Table of Contents

<i>Preface</i>	1
<i>Introduction</i>	3

## SECTION 1. MOVEMENT

Gesture of Awareness CHARLES GENOUD	11
Body: The Foundation of Insight BHIKKHUNI THANASANTI	17
Movement as Skillful Means to Stillness LORI WONG	22
Finding Our Flow: Continuum Movement and Buddha Dharma ADRIANNE E. VINCENT	27
Permissive Movement as a Dharma Door BRIAN KIMMEL	34
Fostering Equanimity and Mindfulness through Dance/Movement Therapy and Authentic Movement JOAN WITTIG	41
“Hell Is the Land of Tranquil Light”: Dance/Movement Therapy in a Single Moment of Life CRISTINA LIVINGSTONE	48

## SECTION 2. DANCE

Doing Being: Tibetan Buddhism and Postmodern Dance Improvisation KAREN NELSON	59
5Rhythms: A Moving Meditation Practice LUCIA HORAN	65
Ordinary Miracles: Tibetan Yogic Dance ROSE TAYLOR GOLDFIELD	73

viii **Table of Contents**

Dance as Dharma Practice in the Twenty-First Century LALITARĀJA	83
Contemplative Dance Practice: A Dancer's Meditation Hall, a Meditator's Dance Hall BARBARA DILLEY	91
Zenful Dance: Breath Movement Meditation LEAH JOY MALBERG	97

**SECTION 3. PERFORMANCE**

Co-Creating with Space: Space Is Solid, You Are Empty LEE WORLEY	105
Dancing in the Footsteps of the Buddha WYNN FRICKE	113
Sangha in the Spotlight: Performance and Community-Building in a Small Prairie City FRAN GILBOY	119
Commit, Amplify, Inquire: Dark Work and Remix as Contemplative Rehearsal Practices SEAN FEIT	128
The Whole World Is a Symbol: Performing the Embodied Landscape as a Buddhist Practice ANNA TZAKOU	137

**SECTION 4. RITUAL**

Dharma Jam: A Modern Buddhist Dance Liturgy HARRISON BLUM	147
Charya Nritya: Nepalese Ritual Dance of Deity Yoga HELEN FOX APPELL	155
The Mandala Dance of the 21 Praises of Tara PREMA DASARA	164
Moving in Grace: A Buddhist-Inspired Ritual Dance Practice HILARY LAKE	170
Circles in Our World, Rituals for Our Time: Dances of Universal Peace ANAHĀTĀ IRADAH	178

**SECTION 5. THEORY**

Somatic Meditation: Rediscovering the Body as the Ground of the Spiritual Path	187
---	-----

Body as the Dharma Gate WILLA B. MILLER	192
Shadowing the Ephemeral: Embodied Emptiness Through Form TOMIE HAHN	200
Cast: Exploring Ground, Path, and Fruition in Early Embryology KIM SARGENT-WISHART	208
<b>SECTION 6. GUIDED PRACTICES</b>	
Earth Breathing Practice Instructions REGINALD A. RAY	219
Accessing the Subtle Energy Body BHIKKHUNI THANASANTI	223
Authentic Movement: Moving and Witnessing JOAN WITTIG	226
Basic Contemplative Dance Practice Form BARBARA DILLEY	229
Permissive Movement BRIAN KIMMEL	231
Tune In, Stand Around: Four Postmodern Dance Improvisation Scores KAREN NELSON	234
Zenful Dance: Leading Breath Movement Meditation LEAH JOY MALBERG	238
Ground, Path and Fruition KIM SARGENT-WISHART	242
Geopoetics: A Buddhist-Inspired Site-Specific Performance Practice ANNA TZAKOU	246
Dharma Jam: How to Lead a Buddhist Dance Ritual HARRISON BLUM	251
Moving in Grace: How to Guide the Practice HILARY LAKE	255
<i>References</i>	261
<i>About the Contributors</i>	267
<i>Index</i>	271



# Geopoetics

## *A Buddhist-Inspired Site-Specific Performance Practice*

ANNA TZAKOU

Geopoetics training is a contemplative practice of performance making in and with the landscape. “Geo-” comes from the Greek prefix *γεω-* which means “coming from earth.” “Poetics” derives from the word *ποιητική*, which means the method of composing an artistic product. This chapter portrays a practical strategy to access a site and elaborate its embodiment toward the production of a performance event. The practice addresses theater and dance practitioners without being exclusive; therefore, it does not presuppose a specific training style. Based on a contemplative art-making tradition, the training evaluates the process as a product. It invites the practitioners to work from responding rather than acting, allowing the material to arise and direct them into a performance structure. It is an approach that presupposes trust and confidence in one’s own process and cultivates a nonjudgmental curiosity about the world’s phenomena.

Landscapes are divided into urban and nonurban. They are segments of space that may not have been contextualized by the human experience. Literally and metaphorically, landscapes enclose a view; a sense of perspective which one aims to resonate with and expose into sight/site through Geopoetics practice. The below suggested exercises refer to rural environments. If one is not familiar with working in nonperformance spaces, it is recommended to start with a natural landscape for several reasons: It is open, accessible, and beneficial when interrelating with it. It proposes a clear materiality to elaborate, and it functions as a transparent feedback mechanism. Although these features are applied to all sites, in the rural ones these attributes are amplified and thus more easily listened to. This chapter is organized according to Anna Halprin’s three-structure discipline of working with nature: “contact, explore and respond.”<sup>1</sup> Integrating Buddhist and performance practices, Geopoetics is divided into a double-fold process: attunement and actualization. The first phase investigates movement, voice, and objects on site as a specific “being-ness.” The second phase organizes the on-site experience into a performance structure. These processes could be applied to solo or ensemble work. The following *étude* exemplifies a group practice of attunement.



## Select a Site—Make the Transition

The first task of attuning is to find a place where we feel drawn to work. It could be a familiar place that instinctively came to our mind as a first thought, or it could be a site discovered by wandering through a specific area. The working site must be a place where you feel safe, comfortable, and interested to spend some time.<sup>2</sup> Having chosen a location, learn more about it: How is it used and why? Does it have any historical and cultural context? What are the oral traditions or histories that encompass it? How do the local people and authorities consider it? The answers to these questions can ignite other performative material (texts, songs, objects, stories) that may later supplement and enrich the somatic process. This is a preparatory phase; once the information is gathered, keep it in the back of your head and return to it when structuring the material.

The practice begins with the transition to the chosen site. It is important to allow part of the transportation, if possible, to take place by foot. Walking initiates the mindfulness somatic practice of the landscape. Group walking practice is based on the walking contemplation found in the *Satipatthana Sutta*, but follows a more open and flexible structure. Practitioners may walk in a line an equal distance apart or with less order. In either case, the group walks with a sense of togetherness, in silence. Notice the moments where the feet meet the ground; maintain the gaze on the horizontal level without having a fixed point; pay attention to thoughts, associations, ideas, and images that arise while passing through the landscape. The walking practice effects the transition from the social self to the working process and the experience of the site. It opens the body and mind in the space, making it available to enter the landscape through active listening. Like an emptying or cleansing process, it introduces the body to a direct experience of the space and creates the “white canvas” through which the body-landscape interrelationship will take place.

## Contact

Once the group arrives on site, allow some time to digest the walk and take some notes. Recording the experience after each exercise is essential. It is a way to train the mind to become a nonjudgmental observer. It also functions as an account of events to which you could return later in the performance-making process. The practice continues with sensory and spatial awareness exercises. These practices open up the bodily experience in the landscape and provide an intermediate zone for you to notice when and how the outer landscape meets the inner. Blindfolded walking and slow rolling are two exercises of the sensory awareness practice. Working with no vision can be overwhelming; therefore, if you feel that you need support, do the exercise in pairs where one acts as the “eyes” for the other. This does not mean you play a restrictive role for your partner; it is mostly to create a sense of support and safety. Walk barefoot and blindfolded from one point to another within a time frame of twenty minutes. The aim is to absorb the environment through a different sensory gate and notice what arises with the incoming information. Follow a pace that feels natural to you.

The rolling exercise entails rolling on the ground in slow motion with movement initiated by the eyes. Lie down on your front, place your hands on the ground aligned



toward the sky and lifts your head from the ground; your eyes keep looking further behind you. Push with your hands and start to rotate your upper body, turning your torso and legs and eventually rolling onto your back. In the same manner, keep moving toward the other side. Find a slow and organic flow with an equal tempo during all the phases of the roll. The aim is to have a sense that it is the eyes' exploration of the space that makes the rolling happen. Notice where you hold back and release more of your muscles into the ground. The blindfolded walk and the rolling practices, as simple as they sound, provide a somatic frame to listen and contemplate the story patterns, memories, associations, and personal histories evoked by the moving body in the landscape.

Another way of investigating place is by positioning the body/ies on site and exploring the ways their placement creates meaning. The practice is one of spatial awareness and investigates the following questions: Why are some images on site more engaging than others? What do they activate in the place, in the bodies, and in the watchers? The following exercise is called the "still shots" and is inspired by and structured based on Barbara Dilley's "Red Square" practice. Select a specific direction of the landscape and set a frame as a stage. Define an audience side and a performance side. You can play with how near or far you want these sides to be. Your movement vocabulary is sitting, standing, lying, and stillness (allowing all of their variations to take place). The instructions are: Enter the frame; select a posture; sense and inhabit the image you formulate; offer it to the watchers; dissolve it; and leave.

The task could start as solos, duets, and so on. You could also supplement the process with objects, or as Dilley names them, "allies."<sup>3</sup> This also functions as an opportunity to explore the objects found at the site. In taking a posture, it is important to consider the relations the body creates with the natural elements and how they respond back into the image. Enter the frame either by envisioning a position of your body or by deciding at the very last minute through listening to the present moment. This is not about presenting a predetermined story already in the mind. It is about creating from scratch and working with impulse and intuition. You can also play with the tempo of the transitions between the images (in and out of the frames). The watchers could be calling out titles, as attempts to articulate possible meanings of the image. The aim here is to investigate the narrative lines of the space, when and how the bodies on site tell a story.

## Explore

So far, we have been individually practicing our somatic connection with the land. Each one has been investigating his/her own experience on site within the confines of the group. We have been working alone together. The next step is to explore the impulses and the relational dynamics with the landscape not only on a personal level but also on a collective one. For such an objective, I use the improvisational practice of "Open Space" from Dilley's *Contemplative Dance Practice (CDP)*. It is an open-structure movement improvisation that explores the somatic experience in the space as a development of *samatha* meditation.<sup>4</sup> I have been using Open Space in the landscape to practice relating directly to the environment and to act on site as responding. According to Dilley, the discipline synchronizes body and mind with the present moment and aims to explore the activity that is requested from our experience of the space. The practice includes a

their kinetic qualities of stillness, repetition, and tempo (fast or slow). Dilley also structures a twofold discipline of connectivity: being influenced and copying. You can apply this instruction as part of your practice in relating with the other or the site. In this way, the practice becomes a perpetual negotiation between sensing and acting, being and responding, being separated and belonging.

To practice Open Space outdoors, first define the site of the practice, set its borderlines. You could also name an audience side, although it is not necessary. Set a time restraint and a time keeper. Start from where you are; notice your body-mind presence within the atmosphere of the landscape and acknowledge it. Give permission to yourself to be enchanted by the outdoor environment's materiality (e.g., a tree, a rock, a cloud in the sky). Allow yourself to follow an instruction, either initiating from your body as movement or from the environment as a task-activity. There are many strategies to organize such an interaction. A direct way to coordinate it is by formulating the interplay as a task activity (e.g., carrying stones) or as a structured play (e.g., moving whenever you hear a bird sound). Again, the movement is not to be predetermined, but originates organically by your somatic presence on site. Have no expectations! You only need to be open to the stimulus received from the environment (and/or other participants) and attentive to your impulses that arise in response.

Each moment, be aware of the instruction you choose to practice, even if you eventually break it or drop it. It is very easy to space out or follow your habitual mind patterns, which could distract you from openly relating to space and others. If you notice this happening, start fresh and return to the practice. If you recognize your associations and impulses running freely, drop the practice and pursue your flow. The practice functions as an initiator and an anchor; hence, it is not something that you have to stick to. Notice whether you are initiating from an authentic impulse or perhaps from a sense of pressure to be active. This could be manifested as a busyness in your practice or a psychological action-reaction driven situation with your co-practitioners. Notice your work patterns: How long could you be in the space until something arises? Do you initiate from ideas in your mind or impulses in your body? As the practice unfolds, is anything else revealed (a feeling, an image, a memory, or a dream)? There is no correct answer. The key here is awareness.

## *Respond/Actualizing*

After concluding the practice, discuss the experience as a group. Describe as precisely as you can the particular moments (even those that were vague and abstract) and try to decode the reasons you think they are worth revisiting. Use verbs in your descriptions. It could constitute the first material to create a score. This phase of the work functions as a distilment process, and its goal is to understand what worked, how, and why. As you practice more and more in the specific site, you may be inspired to infuse the process with voice material and texts. You may discover subtler levels of interrelation. This is the phase of actualization, when the landscape begins to talk back to you and the division between you and it begins to fade. It is as if you start listening to a melody that has always been there. Now you perceive the landscape experientially. Themes and intentions could rise. This is a good time to return to the site research you did in the beginning of your

## 250 Section 6. Guided Practices

question that relates you with the place? This is your starting point for formulating your site-specific performance. Good luck!

### NOTES

1. Libby Worth and Helen Poynor, *Anna Halprin* (London: Routledge, 2004), 89.
2. Whether you are a facilitator or practitioner of the work, it is important that you take some health and safety precautions—bringing the appropriate gear and being realistic about the group's capacity.
3. Barbara Dilley, "Allies." Accessed June 4, 2015. <http://barbaradilley.com/excerpts>.
4. See my earlier chapter in the Performance section of this book.

