

Saumaa, Hiie. "Practicing Gratitude and Compassion Through Somatics and Dance." *Alternative and Complementary Therapies*, 2021, Vol. 27, No.2. 1-4.

Practicing Gratitude and Compassion Through Somatics and Dance

Hiie Saumaa, PhD

In one of my recent online dance classes, I told the participants, ranging from their 30s to their 60s, 'Let's focus on gratitude today and explore this word through the body. Let's see what movement evokes in us in relation to this word.' 'I often feel my heart expanding and sense gratitude and love for life when I dance and move. But what is it about movement and music that puts us in touch with these emotions? Please remind yourself of the word "gratitude" every now and then throughout the class and pay attention to what emerges,' I added. The dance classes that I teach are somatic, mindful, and embodied: instead of learning choreographic movement, we use movement to explore who we are and how we feel. Exploring gratitude through movement would hardly be a part of a ballet or modern dance class but in a mindful movement class, it is befitting. Holistic movement practices such as Nia dance, the practice I was teaching in the example above, are meant for people with different movement abilities and offer opportunities to learn about the body, emotions, the imagination, as well as abstract phenomena, such as gratitude, through movement.

After the class I asked the participants for feedback. ‘When I was dancing, I thought of people who for some reason or other cannot do these kinds of motions – maybe they are in a wheelchair or bedridden or have injuries,’ one participant said. ‘I felt so grateful that I can move,’ she added. Another student mentioned, ‘I’m grateful that I have the mind that can make the body move in these ways – my mind and my body are coordinated and healthy. I’m grateful that I can move in so many *different* ways. There is a richness about my movements.’ ‘When I was dancing, I was reminded of my flexibility – I am thankful for that. My husband has arthritis and every day I witness how much stiffness he has in his body and in his movements. I am grateful for the ability to bend, to have a wide range of motion, and to be able to move with ease.’

Somatics refers to physical awareness practices that emphasize moving from the inside out.¹ Inner connection to movement and learning to pay attention to the sensations in the body are integral to somatic practices. The goal is to keep the participants engaged, active, responsible for their wellbeing, enthused about and connected to their physical movement practices but to do so in ways that minimize strain, burnout, boredom, as well as risk of physical injury. What are some of the ways in which somatics provide compassionate conditioning and develop a sense of gratitude? What would developing gratitude and compassion through movement be important?

Compassionate Body

To heal and develop a holistic approach to mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual wellbeing, we might need to pay closer attention to nutrition, find new movement methods, and try out different therapeutic modalities. But we might also need

to look into our thoughts and language about the body. How do we regard and speak to and about the body? Self-care involves listening to how we talk about our bodies, both inwardly, in the language that remains unexpressed vocally, and publicly, in the language that we share with others. ‘My stupid hip,’ ‘I’ve never liked the shape of my legs,’ ‘I have a big behind and it looks ridiculous,’ ‘I hate my belly,’ ‘my arms are ugly – look how the skin and the muscles sag,’ are examples of language that are critical and judgmental of the physical self. They are all too familiar to many of us.

One of the most important gifts of somatic movement methods is the fact that they can help us develop kindness toward our own self and others and increase compassion for the body. Somatics classes assist participants in regarding their organs, joints, muscles, bones, and the nervous system with the sense of curiosity, marvel, awe, and kindness. Instead of focusing on the body being a particular size, the abdominals a particular shape, and the weight a particular measure, in a somatic movement class, we seek for feeling well and at home in the body. We refrain from pushing the body to move at a particular speed or with a particular kind of intensity. Instead, a somatic practitioner learns to listen to the body and treat the emerging physical sensations as information that can provide new perspectives and serve as a kernel for reflection to understand our emotions. An example of this kind of embodied reflection would be, ‘I feel ill at ease in my belly. I sense nervousness there. What can this sensation tell me about myself today?’ Or ‘my gait is so bold and I sense confident in my body today. I sense elongation in the front of my thighs, near the hips. What movements did I do yesterday or today that help me feel so free and at ease today?’ Or ‘I sense tightness in the back of my neck. What movements could I do to help my neck feel better? Let me pay attention to whether my thoughts feel

the effect of these neck movements – whether I can think better and more creatively after I've done some stretches for the neck.'

In a somatic movement class, we can practice and enhance gratitude by noticing and celebrating the work of different body parts: the functioning of the joints, the muscles, and the organs are sources for wonder. In a free dance sequence, we can take some minutes to explore how our finger joints, wrists, elbows, and the shoulder girdle move. In a standing position or traveling in space, we can move these joints and observe the variety of movements that are available to us. Noticing the work of the gluteus muscles and the abdominals in holding the torso up and setting the spine into an easeful position can be done with the mindset of gratitude. Reminding ourselves of the constant, silent work of the vital organs in keeping us functioning and healthy is an act of gratitude.

We can bring a contemplative, reverent attitude to any movement we are performing: our perception of the movement might change and we might gain new insights. In a mindful strength training class, while we were getting ready to do some squats, I told the students: 'Quadriceps muscles are integral in taking us forward in space. Our legs take us from one place to another. As we do the squats, I invite you to conjure up in your mind a teacher or teachers that have been important to you. Let them come to your awareness, your mind's eye, spontaneously. Perhaps we send them a mental thank you as we do these squats. These teachers have helped us move forward in life.' We linked the physical movement – performing squats – to memories and emotions. The uniting link was the idea of 'moving forward.' We practiced movement, gratitude, and a soulful connection to our life at the same time.

Participants are often surprised to find out how little they know about the body, experientially and anatomically, and how hearing how the body speaks takes practice and attention. To enhance participants' ability to verbalize their physical sensations, I create moments in the class where I ask participants to look for a word or a phrase to describe what they feel in the body. For example, after finishing a set of bicep curls in a somatic strength training class, we take a brief pause and explore what feels different and how we would describe the sensations in words. Listening to everyone's answers in a big group might not be optimal: however, creating a space, an invitation for the participants to come up with a verbal response, even if it remains unvoiced, helps them develop their vocabulary for movement sensations. This kind of noticing and word-finding helps participants to gain self-knowledge but can also be helpful when clients talk to a medical professional. The participants develop a clearer sense of what is going on inside of the body and can express these feelings and sensations in words with greater confidence and precision.

Attending to the sensations of the body can be a reminder of the fact that much of our wellbeing and a sense of contentment rely on the proper functioning of the senses. A Nia dance class or a Feldenkrais Method class could focus on the eyes and the sense of sight, for example. We might explore the eye and movement coordination, experiment with dancing with the eyes half closed, do 'palming' with the hands cupping the eyes, or perform exercises to strengthen or relax the eye muscles. At the end of the class, we might remind ourselves of 'the miracle of your eyes, which enable you to see the faces of your loved ones and friends, read printed books, newspapers, and emails, watch television, see the beauty of nature, and, most importantly, see your way through life,' to

borrow the words of author Rhonda Byrne, who has written widely on the topic of gratitude.²

At the end of my somatic dance and strength training classes, I invite students to lie on the ground or in a comfortable seated position and attend to breathing. We take a moment to listen to the sound of our inhales and exhales, to feel this internal rhythm, to notice and be present with this sign of life force within us. I often invite the students to recognize the miracle of this opportunity to be alive another day and to have a functioning body and cognitive abilities. During these meditative moments, I often direct participants' attention toward different parts of the body. For example, I might ask them to move their mind's eye toward their hands and relax the palms, the fingers, the wrists, the back of the hand. I invite them to regard their hand in the mind's eye with amazement – how much they carry, create, do, give, take, lift, grasp, hold, heal, touch, and caress throughout the day. How amazing to have these hands and to be able to perform these different actions. Directing awareness to a body part, the entire body, or the senses and creating a tone of curiosity and wonder is one example of cultivating moments of self-love.

In my experience, toward the end of the time spent in movement, we are particularly open to feelings of gratitude: judgments toward oneself and others as well as fast-moving thoughts and mental overwhelm start to lessen. During these calmer, quieter moments after movement we seem to be more receptive to feelings of compassion. Sometimes I invite students to think of a person they know who needs some healing or support as we move meditatively during the last few songs of an hour-long class. In these instances, movement can take on the dimension of an embodied prayer – it becomes an

act of giving or sharing, even if the person on the receiving end is not there to witness. Participants might feel more grounded, content, and at peace after performing simple slow movements with an intent of dedicating these movements to the wellbeing of someone else.

Conflict Resolution

Somatic and meditative practices can be used to extend compassion and gratitude beyond the self to one's relationships with others. Movement activities and connecting to physical sensations can be used to bring compassion to human interactions and peaceful solutions to conflicts. Martha Eddy, one of the leading voices in the realm of somatics, uses somatic movement for violence prevention and explores how movement and dance can bring about more peaceful relationships in schools, hospitals, and other institutions.³⁴ She uses somatic education for stress reduction, heightened understanding of body cues, and opportunities for peace making. She notes that having a 'socially conscious body' is 'where you listen to what is going on inside of you, whether it's in stillness or through movement, and you discover more about yourself in relationship to the world we live in. It's about bringing somatic awareness into some kind of cultural context.'⁵ Bringing attention to the body is one way to understand what is under the surface in a situation of conflict resolution: learning to read movement without immediately interpreting and assuming that one knows the meaning of a movement or a gesture is 'the first part of digging into the feelings, and not assuming,' Eddy remarks.⁶

To bring another example from a different realm, before the word 'somatics' became more widely used and known,⁷ Margaret Fisk Taylor (1908-2004), a liturgical

dance pioneer and author in the United States, promoted movement as a way to increase empathy for others and to solve conflicts. In the 1960s she was developing movements that would bring people from opposing sides closer to peace. She used movement for ‘clarifying problems, enlarging understanding, exploring new possibilities and relating to others in a total way.’⁸ Through movement, the participants took on the roles of both the ‘unreconciled’ and the ‘reconciler.’ She proposed that we can assume the role of ‘the unreconciled,’ those who ‘feel isolated, alienated, vindictive and so on,’ not only mentally and verbally but via the body, ‘through muscular contractions, twisted bones and agony embedded into the marrow of being, so that we feel a pulsing identification with an unreconciled person.’⁹ Through this ‘total identification,’ a ‘link of acceptance’ starts to emerge and we can respond sensitively. Taylor proposed that we need to understand the other person’s situation through our own bodies and use movement to get a glimpse at what their situations might be like.

The impact of Taylor’s exercises and movements is not only directed toward the other: the effect is supposed to be felt by the ‘reconciler’ as well. The purpose of the exercises was to release the mover from his/her own fears and anger and prepare him/her to understand how another person can feel isolated and alienated by similar fears and emotions. She outlined one of such exercises:

Consider some emotional tension, some recurrent fear or hostility that causes a distortion in your living. Dramatize this tension as if you were a piece of modern metal sculpture – angular, distorted, twisted. Take that kind of position. Don’t sit or kneel on the floor because you would be too comfortable. Don’t assume a

passive, lethargic pose. That would be too relaxed. Choose an intense, unbalanced, bent-knee position.¹⁰

The exercise then involved intensifying that position and feeling the contractions in the whole body – the jaw, neck, hands, shoulders, feet, legs, abdomen. She asked the participant to endure the strain until the tensest area started to release: ‘Allow this particular strained area to start to find its release from its sustained tension. Little by little, as your physical tension loosens, your emotional tension will also start to lessen without your conscious volition,’ she said.¹¹ Successive releases will start to flow through the whole being. According to her method, as a result of this process, ‘you are beginning to feel an acceptance of your own problem and also have come to realize that you and your problem have been accepted and absorbed into a manageable existence.’¹² Taylor offered similar exercises for pairs and groups: the ‘reconciler’ mirrors the distorted position of the ‘unreconciled.’

Examining how movement and somatic education can increase compassion and empathy toward oneself and others is an exciting, underexplored area of research in somatics. Developing compassion and gratitude through movement and awareness of bodily sensations can shed light on the ways in which the body and movement aid us in understanding abstract phenomena that pertain to emotions, relationships, and group dynamics. Next to turning to text-based information such as books, dictionaries, and case studies, somatic practices encourage us to turn to movement and physical sensations and take the body and movement seriously as guides and sources for knowledge.

Conclusion

Gratitude develops in us reverence in front of life – we are moved to contemplate life and death and our place in this cycle. Practicing gratitude and opening up a space for gratitude in a dance or movement class develops compassion for our own body and different layers and elements that make up the whole self. Once we start paying attention to gratitude, we will start developing self-love. With an increased sense of self-love or care for the body, participants might be more inclined to seek out and commit to practices, types of food, mindset, thoughts, activities, and people that are healthy for them. Participants might develop healthier habits and more wholesome lifestyles and avoid addiction, self-harm, and negative self-talk. Practicing gratefulness, in movement or in meditation, is one key toward more harmonious and peaceful connection to oneself and to others and an important step toward a more deeply felt connection to life itself.

References

¹ Saumaa, H. Dance Therapeutics: Movement as a Path Toward Healing. *Alternative and Complementary Therapies* 2019; 25; 5:238-240.

² Byrne, R. *The Magic*. New York: Atria Books, 2012. p. 55.

³ Eddy, M. *Mindful Movement: The Evolution of the Somatic Arts and Conscious Action*. Chicago: Intellect, the University of Chicago Press, 2017.

⁴ Eddy, M. Dancing Solutions to Conflict: Field-Tested Somatic Dance for Peace, *Journal of Dance Education*, 2016, 16:3, 99-111.

⁵ Eddy, M. Five College Dance Department Lecture.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mVwJg1quwpk> Accessed on December 11, 2020.

⁶ Eddy, M. Episode 044: Dr. Deborah Heifetz and Dr. Martha Eddy.

<https://www.susancoleman.global/sn044-deborah-heifetz-martha-eddy> Accessed on December 11, 2020.

⁷ Thomas, H. What is Somatics? Somatics 1986, 5.4. 4-9.

⁸ Taylor, M. F. Creative Movement: Steps Toward Understanding. New York: Friendship Press, 1969. p 2.

⁹ Taylor, M. F. Creative Movement: Steps Toward Understanding. New York: Friendship Press, 1969. P. 2.

¹⁰ Taylor, M. F. Creative Movement: Steps Toward Understanding. New York: Friendship Press, 1969. P. 2.

¹¹ Taylor, M. F. Creative Movement: Steps Toward Understanding. New York: Friendship Press, 1969. P. 3.

¹² 3 Taylor, M. F. Creative Movement: Steps Toward Understanding. New York: Friendship Press, 1969. p. 3.

Hiie Saumaa, PhD (Columbia), is a dance writer and movement educator. She writes about dance, somatics, embodied knowledge, health, creativity, and imagination. In 2018-2019, she was an inaugural fellow at Columbia University's Institute for Ideas & Imagination in Paris, France, and in 2017, she was a fellow at the Dance Division of the

New York Public Library for the Performing Arts. She has taught at Columbia University, New York University, The University of Tennessee, Paris College of Art, the Catholic University of Paris, Emlyon Business School, and l'Institut Mines-Télécom. Dr. Saumaa is completing a book on creative process of the choreographer Jerome Robbins. Her publications have appeared in *Dance Research Journal*, *Dance Chronicle*, *The Journal of Dance, Movement, and Spiritualities*, *Somatics Magazine/Journal*, and *Routledge Companion to Dance Studies*, among others. She is a certified instructor of Nia dance, The BodyLogos© Technique, and JourneyDance™, and teaches classes and workshops in sensory-based dance modalities, mindful strength training, and somatic awareness.