

# The Experience of Movement Meditation: A Dance of Rhythmic Paradox and Time

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## Abstract

**There has been a growing interest in non-Western approaches to attention, consciousness, health, and healing. One largely unexplored tradition stems from the teachings of Gurdjieff, which focus on movement meditation. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the experience of movement meditation as a first step toward determining potential for health and healing. Phenomenology was selected to explore the experience of movement meditation. The essential structure of the experience of movement meditation reflected three elements: (a) an in-the-moment experience of movement meditation, (b) outcomes of movement meditation, and (c) metathemes that surround the whole experience of movement meditation.**

*Key Words: Health, healing, meditation, complementary medicine, alternative medicine, consciousness*

## Introduction

Caring has been defined as the essence and moral ideal of nursing (Leininger, 1991; Watson, 1988). Over the past 40 years, the concept of caring has taken center stage in nursing research and practice to explicate the meaning of this highly valued domain of nursing (Benner & Wrubel, 1989; Gaut, 1988; Leininger, 1988; Ray, 1988; Watson, 1988). Caring knowledge is what defines the nursing perspective and it is the centrality of caring in the human health experience, which has been recognized as the focus of the nursing discipline (Newman, Sime, & Corocoran-Perry, 1991). The paradigmatic shifts in nursing perspectives have changed how the discipline views human beings, health, and healing (Fawcett, 2000; Newman, 1992; Parse, 1998). Health is no longer viewed as the absence of disease but as expanding consciousness within human beings, which is revealed in their evolving patterns and is characterized by meaning (Newman, 2008).

Parallel to the shift in nursing perspec-

tives has been a marked and growing interest in non-Western approaches to attention, consciousness, health, and healing. Although often termed “complementary” or “alternative,” many of these approaches have a much longer lineage than empirical Western medicine based on reductionistic paradigms. Buddhism is a notable example, and despite its complexity, multiplicity of systems (Mahayana, Hinayana, & Vajrayana), and distinct schools within each system, secular, Westernized, health-related applications have become nearly mainstream. “Mindfulness meditation” for stress reduction, as promulgated by advocate Jon Kabat-Zinn (1994), is just one such example.

Recent advances in neuroimaging have been coupled with new understandings of neuroplasticity. Neuroplasticity has been identified as the potential for repeated experience to foster new neuronal growth and connections, which in turn enables emergence of latent intellectual, emotional, or physical possibilities. Such new knowledge suggests that ancient teachings and techniques have endured and evolved over 2,500 years because they offer genuine and unique effects to contemporary society. Investigation of the effects of meditation,

for example, suggest definitive neurophysiologic (Cahn & Polich, 2006) and immune function impacts (Davidson et al., 2003). Similarly, a comprehensive review of 47 research studies on Tai Chi finds evidence of physiological and psychological benefits, despite methodological challenges (Wang, Collett, & Lau, 2004).

One novel and heretofore largely unexplored tradition stems from the teachings of G.I. Gurdjieff, as elucidated by his student and proponent J.G. Bennett. Unique methods of attention development include active guided sitting meditation, historically referenced as “Morning Exercises” because they are done every morning, and complex, precise movement patterns accompanied by corresponding music. The movement patterns, colloquially called “Sacred Dance,” “Sacred Gymnastics,” or, most commonly, simply “The Movements,” are the focus of this study. Specifically, the purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the lived experience of movement meditation, as a first step toward determining utility and potential transferability to health and healing.

## Background

Contemporary scientific literature has given scant attention to Gurdjieff’s work or philosophy; only two references were found in the peer-reviewed health and medical literature. Goleman (1988) reported that when compared to other forms of meditation, Gurdjieff meditators showed greater cortical specificity—the ability to activate areas of the brain necessary to the task at hand while leaving irrelevant areas of the brain inactive. Potentially, these findings suggest applicability in maladies

that range from attention-deficit disorder to obsessive-compulsive disorder. Stanton (1997) used a Gurdjieff technique of “two-fold awareness” in an interventional study of 24 female homemakers who wished to gain more control over their lives. When compared to the control group, the treatment group scored significantly higher on the Control of Life Thermometer, both immediately after treatment and at 6 months follow-up.

Research studies specifically exploring Gurdjieff Movements were not identified. Documented in print, however, are personal accounts of first, second, and third generation students of Gurdjieff. Many of these texts are not particularly accessible through traditional literature reviews but instead may be found at booksellers specializing in Gurdjieff and his lineage, for example, Bennett Books ([www.bennettbooks.org](http://www.bennettbooks.org)) and By The Way Books ([www.bythewaybooks.com](http://www.bythewaybooks.com)). All accounts clarify the essential, compelling, and unique aspects of the accompanying music and imply that the music does not merely accompany the movements or the movements the music. Rather, together these dances are part of a single process designed to address Gurdjieff’s “fundamental concern” about the human condition, the “imbalance of the three parts of our psyche, which he terms “the intellectual, emotional, and instinctive or moving life of man (sic)” (Daniel-Spitz, 2007, p. 106). Indeed, this tradition is sometimes called “The Fourth Way” because it combines the use of the body (the Fakir path), the heart (the Monk path) and the mind (the Yogi path, inclusive of modern “mindfulness” meditation) and theoretically enables far more rapid personal and emotional growth than any of these paths pursued in isolation (Ouspenski, 1949). Moreover, the Gurdjieff is “emphatic that the settings of family, work, and the marketplace are the best context for inner discipline, providing the raw material for meditation” (Goleman, 1988, p. 103).

### Relationship of the Researchers to This Tradition

Two of the researchers conducting this study had no previous connections of any kind to the Gurdjieff tradition but participated because of their experience as qualitative researchers. These researchers were responsible for the coding of themes. The third author is a long-time student of Fourth Way teachings. Her interest in empirical research using study methods accepted to Western science emerged from her personal experience of The Movements and fellow students’ reports of positive life-effects, both physical and emotional.

### Methodology

The qualitative method of phenomenology was selected to explore, describe, and understand the lived experience of movement meditation. While there are a number of different interpretations of the phenomenological method, Spiegelburg (1982) identified the characteristics of the method common to all interpretations. This general framework involves three steps: (a) obtaining a naïve description from informants about their experiences of the phenomenon, (b) investigating general essences and apprehending essential relationships among essences, and (c) phenomenological description.

The first step in obtaining a naïve account of the lived experience was to intuit the phenomenon (Oiler, 1986). It involved exploring both the perception of the experience of movement meditation before reflection or interpretation and then the reflective thoughts about how the experience was lived. In order to enter and accurately portray another’s reality, bracketing, or the setting aside of the researcher’s assumptions and knowledge about movement meditation was necessary.

The second step in the method is phenomenological reflection or analysis, identifying the structure of the phenomenon

according to the elements and their configuration (Oiler, 1986). This involved free imaginative variation or viewing the phenomenon in all possible ways that it can appear in lived experience in order to identify the constituent elements of the phenomenon: how they related to each other and other phenomena, what patterns or general essences existed, and what essential essences could be discovered.

The third step of the phenomenological method is the description that expresses all the awarenesses that have emerged through reflection and analysis. Reflection upon the particular experience of movement meditation of each participant and comparison of this unique experience and its structures with the unique lived experiences of other participants was important because it was assumed that each unique meaning would contribute in its own way to an even fuller understanding of movement meditation.

Following approval by the Institutional Review Board (IRB), which included translation into Italian and back translation by a different translator, data were gathered in Northeast Italy during a 10-day intensive seminar. Participants in this residential retreat were primarily Italian with a small complement of German, Austrian, and British students. A small purposive group of five participants (three women, two men) were interviewed to evolve a rich, “thick” description of the lived experience of movement meditation. Informed consent was obtained and each participant was assigned a code number. Names were not recorded anywhere except on the consent form. Participants were advised that although the research may be published, all data associated with the research would remain confidential.

Data collection was performed in a place of the participant’s choosing. Consistent with phenomenology, no structured interview protocols were used to guide data collection. One central question was explored, “Tell me about your experience with the

Gurdjieff/Bennett Movements.” Other questions to probe for the deeper meaning of the movement meditation experience were asked through a method of “talk turning” (Ray, 1988) or taking cues from a previous answer for subsequent questions. The translator, a professional translator who was fluent in multiple languages, was also a student of the teachings of the Gurdjieff tradition. All interviews were conducted in the native language of the subject and, for this study, was limited to Italian and British students.

Saturation was achieved when all that could be understood about the experience was obtained. Saturation required one to two interviews of approximately 1 hour for each participant. Tape recording was utilized to facilitate data collection. All of the taped interviews were transcribed. After data collection and transcription of the data, the transcripts were read, developing a sense of the whole and extracting significant statements about the experience of movement meditation, marking the transcription whenever transitions of meaning were perceived. The data were reduced, organized into clusters or themes, and then examined for overlapping data. Finally the themes were integrated into an exhaustive description of the experience of movement meditation, reflecting the fundamental structure and meaning of the experience of movement meditation.

### Essential Structure of the Experience of Movement Meditation

The essential structure of the lived experience of movement meditation reflected three fundamental elements: (a) an in-the-moment experience of movement meditation, (b) outcomes of movement meditation, and (c) metathemes which surround the whole experience of movement meditation.

### In the Moment Experience of Movement Meditation

Isolation of significant thematic statements from interviews led to the formula-

tion of four essential themes that described the in-the-moment experience of movement meditation. These themes were: (a) existential calm, (b) clarity of perception/vision, (c) embodying, and (d) sensing/feeling.

*Existential calm.* The theme of existential calm was characterized by the participants as a calmness that came over them, a releasing of energy, or a letting go. This calm was exemplified in the rhythmic movement that occurred in the movement meditation and allowed them to be fully present in the experience. As one participant described:

Everything that I was seeing suddenly became more alive. I was looking at the trees and my gaze was completely relaxed. I remember that I was very relaxed but very clear. In the last seminar, doing a movement—what happened was that I was a lot more relaxed and it was like a shift from one day to the next. I could define it as letting go because the previous day I was very worried.

Another participant described:

I have always been kind of tense, overexcited kind of person. Now, it is not like this anymore. Something has changed. And, I can enter relaxation state very quickly. I just need to remember... Another thing that has changed is that to be able to be in a present moment.

Another participant commented on initial resistance to the movement meditation and then the acceptance and calm that movement meditation ultimately facilitated:

During a seminar, because we had to present movements, and at the certain movement, I had this blues, this thing that was kicked up and wanting to surface. He [the instructor] told me, “If you feel like doing it you do it, otherwise you don’t.” And I relaxed a lot, I was really calm when the moment came. I felt very joined with the group, even if I was not in the group, I was breathing with them...if I feel that the

other has an energy that does not allow for mine, or out of my natural alchemy that they don’t get on well, I don’t insist to meet the other, I just let things be the way they are.

*Clarity of perception/vision.* Participants described a clarity of perception or vision that occurred during the experience of movement meditation. This clarity of perception was also characterized as a heightened awareness.

As one participant explained:

...all around me the trees took on this very bright green shade that I had never seen. And the gaze was clear, deep and actually I am quite short sighted and this amazed me because the lenses I am wearing are not as strong as I should be wearing—that’s my choice. Quite the contrary I saw very clearly all the outlines of things...the sensation that I had was that not just all this was brighter, greener, more concrete, more real, but I also felt myself much more concrete...After that, it occurred to me that I could have called this a vision...any object, even the most trivial one, in that experience is alive and has great importance and you can see everything very clearly.

Another participant commented not only on the clarity of perception but the actual ability to visualize new potentials in the experience. Visualizing movements before they happened lead to new perceptual capabilities:

By the morning exercises, the movements help you to develop your power of visualization in movements, because you try to visualize what to do next, and how this movement works. You actually visualize something as part of the body. In the morning exercise, you are visualizing things you can do in your body...so it’s like meditation, but you are not just sitting there observing thoughts, watching, or trying to stop

thoughts...the body becomes sort of a place where you can move around. It is like a child imagining you can move things around, move things from one part of the body to another, or move energy from here to there. You can imagine the possibilities and imagine that happening. So you are visualizing this process.

The clarity and vitality of experience that happens in movement meditation is again reflected in these statements:

...it happens here after the movement and it also happened at home in other kinds of situations. What I see is a lot clearer and brighter, colors are much brighter. And objects and people are more clear...sharper. It is this third dimension world exhausted...intensified. This can last five minutes, half hour. At that moment there is a very strong perception that holds within the body, not just outside.

Some described this clarity of perception and vision to include a mindfulness, a focused concentration or attention:

You do it to get some sort of direct enjoyment as well; sometimes you are very concentrated on what you are doing and what comes next, and how you have to do things.

While in the movements you realize what steps you have to take, what movements with the arms or legs you are going to take next, because everything happens in a very short period of time. You have to know what you are doing next so you are able to do it.

*Embodying.* A theme of embodying included a new awareness of the body/sensations by participants while experiencing movement meditation. Some described this awareness as sense awareness, some as energy awareness, and some as body awareness:

The first time I didn't have any particular experience with regard to the move-

ment. But I felt it was very good for my body. Habits I had in my body. I felt my body was being fuller. It is simply being very present in all the parts of the body, in what might be all the parts of the body. You can also distinguish differences between one part and another one. Surely the biggest one is the one between the sensations one can experience in the limbs. It should bring your attention there and they become ever stronger and you even get to sensing the bones. And then there is another one which is very strong, which is in the center of the chest which is surely of a different kind because it is more flowing. And it is connected to the breath, and this can also be deepened, even as I am talking.

Another participant commented:

After a while of doing this, always with my eyes being very relaxed, I started feeling, especially in the limbs, and then in the whole body rigors of sensations and the positions were happening on their own. Of course, I was not perfect but if the positions were in a certain way and that's where my limbs were going the sensations were just like a river as if they were saying it's fine and I had to do very, very little for it to happen – just being careful, aware, remembering the sequence and the rest was with the music and with these sensations in the body, which I cannot describe other than as a river. After these exercises some sensation, especially seeing and tasting food were much stronger. I think it makes you a little bit more aware, perhaps. In general a little bit more aware, and with movements you become much more aware of your body, space, and time.

Another participant described this increased awareness as a wholeness of experience:

It is an attention that also involves feeling as well as hearing, sight, the senses,

all the senses. At certain times listening with the whole body and therefore being able to perceive, understand something that goes beyond what is manifesting in the world.

Some of the increased sensations described by the participants were a warmth, burning, or pressure in the chest:

And then these things kept on happening all the time—questions, answers all through doing the movement, like many suggestions coming as sensations in the body, as...and also emotions that I feel as a sensation in the chest which I can't name as a kind of pressure here in the chest but I can't say it is anger, it is joy. Simply sensations there that are not connected with somebody offending me and then I am upset. I feel something strongly but nobody has said anything.

When we do the exercise of feeling the exchange of substances, there remains a sensation underneath the sternum...And I don't really know how to describe the sensation, but I know that I can communicate with this part, this thing that I feel here with other parts of the body...as if something is burning, an internal burn...not on the surface.

This also happens as a sensation in the rest of the body.

Others describe this same energy, warmth, and tingling within other areas of the body:

Something happened to my head. It is kind of a little tingling. Some light starts, which allows me to see a different way. I can see more lights...I can really sense there is different tone in my eyes. There is more light; everything is lighter.

During the exercises, the experiences are different. There can be a moment in which we experience the whole body as very lively, and there is an impression of expansion, as this body is a lot bigger than the physical

body. And I bring my attention to a certain point... Those parts also become more alive, bigger. Symmetry of a lot of warmth raises in the whole body. It expands and experiences of inner tingling.

*Sensing/feeling.* The in-the-moment experience of movement meditation included an affective or emotional component, that of heightened sensing/feeling. Some of the emotions included joy, melancholy, feeling strongly or deeply, hope, awe, and calm. Participants described these feelings, "...and that pressure in the chest... I mean it can be any kind of emotion. I can't give it a name. I can't say happy, offended, upset. Simply the thing happened." "Two days ago for the first time when we did this exercise of visualizing parts of the body and putting them in a place outside of our body... I really felt that something was really entering... and joyous." "You do it to get some sort of direct enjoyment... there is a mixture of different feelings, I think. Sometimes it is melancholic feeling or feelings of hope or mystery... And often, quite deep feelings." "After doing these exercises, what was born in me was convictions that it is possible to learn, really, how to live. And, it has to do with confidence, cultivating oneself, doing exercise, because you are more centered."

### *Outcomes of Movement Meditation*

Three essential themes were identified by participants as reflecting outcomes of movement meditation. These included: (a) transcending, (b) enlightening, and (c) transforming and/or recreating experience.

*Transcending.* Some of the participants described one of the outcomes of movement meditation as an experience that transcends the self or is experienced outside the self. It was characterized by connection to those around them as well as an increased sense of spiritual connection outside of themselves. Descriptions included, "I had the ex-

perience that the movement that I am doing is not mine. It belongs to the group." "That was another exercise that had a very powerful effect on me... and I am very connected to and balanced to God." "Other exercises for instance, the nine point exercise... I feel as if boundaries of the body are no longer there... these boundaries are not real." And: "Something opens up here... in the chest. It is like if I entered something that contains me, it is bigger than me. It contains me. I am connected, yet it's bigger, and the ego can go away there. It's a little bit like when the heart opens up."

*Enlightening.* While participants did describe transcendence beyond themselves, they also described a sense of enlightening, a personal discovery, and an increased reflectivity/self awareness of who they were as individuals. Some of the distance that was created by the experience in moving beyond self paradoxically allowed them to increase focus, explore, and understand self, to gain self-mastery:

When I do the moving, it leaves me with an energy... I would like to use this energy better, and bring it ever deeper. I would like to get to renew my life energy now. I have a group of friends... which I hope will get wider and wider... It is a reality to be completely discovered... for me this was simply enlightening.

When I try to do some movement that at first seems difficult or impossible or something... Yeah, it is like a play, a body that becomes a place, in which you can sort of travel around. You can go all kind of places. Inside your head, and down from inside your head through your throat, through your heart, and anyway you want. Maybe it puts you more in contact with your emotions as well. Basic emotions like love or hope... actually helps me in everyday life... through the morning ex-

ercise being able to get in touch with these emotions which in different situations they can be useful.

I no longer have a sudden burst of anger or hysterical kind of reaction with my daughter, with people, family usually. Because there is a distance that allows me to observe what is happening between myself and my daughter. And it is a relationship that occurs in a space and by being within I can also be outside. This has clearly been happening only since I started doing these exercises and this work. It's not the distance between me and her. It is a distance between me and the outside. I was able to see what was happening and this allowed me not to react. It somehow leads you not to judge what is happening; just feel it.

### *Transforming and/or recreating experience.*

The final outcome of the movement meditation experience by participants was a transformation that occurred in them and an ability to recreate the experience and its transformative qualities at a later point in time:

I continued doing the exercises we had been doing that morning and my particular exercise, the one that had been assigned to me. And a few days later it came back, I had this experience two or three times. Especially the second and the third time that I was trying to keep and maintain the sensation in the body, it lasted longer. And this happened to me within the seminar center and what particularly struck me was that any object, even the most trivial in that experience, is alive and has great importance and you can see everything very clearly.

"Now there are moments without him reminding me, even if they are short, in which I feel that I can go back to that body of sensation."

Some of the transformation occurred as a

