



Dancing Presence and Awareness: 'Khaita – Joyful Dances' as a Mindfulness Practice

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I argue that the dance practice of 'Khaita – Joyful Dances' has been intentionally designed as a mindfulness practice with the aim of fostering presence and awareness by the Dzogchen master Namkhai Norbu. The three Khaita principles of awareness (*Dems*, *Gyu* and *Drig*) revolve around aspects of proprioception, smooth movements, musicality, and spatial and group awareness, and guide dancers to the here and now. They demand non-judgmental, purposeful and non-reactive attention, hence mindfulness, that results in more mature states of awareness and presence

Introduction and Contextualization: Khaita - Joyful Dances

Khaita – Joyful Dances (short: Khaita, མཁའི་རྟེན་, *mkha'i rta*) is a translocal and transcultural dance practice founded in 2011 by the Tibetan Buddhist scholar and Dzogchen Master Namkhai Norbu (1938-2018) with the intention of contributing to the preservation of Tibetan culture and fostering presence and awareness. The Khaita collection consisting of around 400 songs is thereby based on Tibetan pop songs carefully chosen by Namkhai Norbu based on their meanings and melodies.

The Khaita choreographies to the songs are both inspired by Tibetan folk dances and created anew for the Khaita corpus by students of Namkhai Norbu.

Namkhai Norbu is considered a great Tibetan scholar and master of the ancient Dzogchen Atiyoga teaching. Dzogchen (Tib. རྫོགས་ཆེན་; *rdzogs chen*) refers to the highest path of realization in Buddhism as well as the primordial state of knowledge of one's nature:

The knowledge transmitted by the master of the Dzogchen (*rdzogs chen*) teachings is neither of an

intellectual nature nor conditioned by the principle of a religious or philosophical ideology. It concerns the reality of human experiences in its immediacy. 'Dzogchen' means 'total' (*chen*) 'perfection' or 'completeness' (*rdzog*): the primordial state of each individual, an absolute potentiality [...] (Clemente in Norbu, 2017, p. 7)¹

The cultivation of presence, awareness and a relaxed, observing mind - mindfulness - is central to all Buddhist practices.² As a Buddhist master, Namkhai Norbu dedicated his life to teaching his students methods to observe themselves, overcome limitations and ultimately become free from suffering.³ While many Buddhist traditions focus on reaching a state of presence and awareness through the limitation of physical activity, Namkhai Norbu emphasized the importance of movement in his Dzogchen teachings:

If you train in sitting meditation, without moving, without even shifting your eyes, it is easier to

discover a calm state, free of thoughts [and be present]. But this is only half the path, because movement is part of our real nature as well. If we develop only the calm state, we can definitely feel relaxed and not confused while we meditate, but sooner or later we will have to move. And what will happen then to our meditation? It is as if you go to a nice hotel to relax and spend some quiet time away from your worries. As nice as it is, it does not last. You stay one day, two days, one week, then you have to go. And all your stress and worries are waiting for you outside. For this reason, in the Dzogchen teachings the emphasis is on knowing how to integrate with movement. (Norbu, 2018, p. 87)

Khaita is one of his proposed methods for the fostering of presence and awareness. The Tibetan word 'Khaita' (མཁའི་རྟལ་, *mkha'i rta*) translates as 'melody of the space' and also 'harmony in space' (Norbu, 2018, p. 93) and aims at exactly this, namely harmonious/melodious movement in space that requires mindfulness. He explains in the following:

What do you need to do when dancing? You need to move in a coordinated way, and for that you have to be present, otherwise you could not dance. If you are present while dancing, you also relax, you do not feel so charged up anymore. Then it becomes beneficial for you. It helps, relaxing, being present, aware...(Norbu, 2018, p. 93-94)

The Khaita collection consists of approximately 400 modern songs by Tibetan artists with Tibetan lyrics. To these 400 songs, there are around 240 dances. Khaita practices, meaning dedicated sessions of singing and dancing, have become an integral part of the (daily) activities of Namkhai Norbu's students and are also practiced by people without direct connection to him. While it is also regularly performed on stage, Khaita is primarily a movement practice without performance ambition. It is further increasingly danced without a spiritual context as a celebration of cultural diversity in different settings and

as a movement practice per se, fostering wellbeing. Khaita is open to everyone, regardless of nation, age, social class, gender, dance experience, predilection for moving, religious or cultural identification.

In this article, I explore in which way Khaita can be perceived as mindfulness dance practice and provide examples from the choreographies to support my findings. I use methodology from Dance Studies to do so and use terminology to describe movements as proposed by Claudia Jeschke (1999). While all dance practices can arguably be associated with mindfulness, requiring increased bodily and mental presence and rooting the dancer in the here and now, the example of Khaita is particular as Namkhai Norbu prescribed it as an explicit mindfulness theory. It revolves around the three principles of *Dems*, *Gyu* and *Drig* that I will elaborate on in detail and investigate in

relation to mindfulness. Before focusing on Namkhai Norbu's theorization of Khaita's principles, I will more closely define the concept of mindfulness to differentiate it from other terms.

Defining Mindfulness

In recent years, mindfulness, believed to originate from Buddhism, has become a widely used term. The Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh, who taught and wrote extensively on mindfulness, calls it 'the miracle by which we master and restore ourselves' and provides the following example:

Consider, for example: a magician who cuts his body into many parts and places each part in a different region - hands in the south, arms in the east, legs in the north, and then by some miraculous power lets forth a cry which reassembles whole every part of his body. Mindfulness is like that - it is the miracle which can call back in a flash our dispersed mind and restore it to

wholeness so that we can live each minute of life. (Hanh, 1975, p. 14)

Jon Kabat-Zinn's definition of mindfulness is the most widely used one in scholarship on the topic and often serves as a reference point for mindfulness researchers: For him, mindfulness is 'a way of being – a way of being in relationship to experience' (Kabat-Zinn, 2021, p. 1557):

Mindfulness means paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally. This kind of attention nurtures greater awareness, clarity, and acceptance of present-moment reality. It wakes us up to the fact that our lives unfold only in moments. (Kabat-Zinn, 1994, p. 4)

Particularly striking is the attribution to mindfulness practice of the quality of non-judgement. This refers to the process of noticing internal and external stimuli without accepting or rejecting them as

good or bad but simply being aware of them.

Mindfulness as a way of paying attention to the present moment non-judgmentally and purposefully is simple to understand conceptually. Mindfulness, or the ability to pay attention in the given moment in the described way, matures with practice. The more one cultivates mindfulness, the higher the increase of awareness. What sounds simple is not easy to apply. For this reason, there are numerous mindfulness exercises that aim at cultivating one's awareness, one of them being the Khaita dance practice in question. Mindfulness practice thus aims at the development and the extension of mindful periods in everyday life, regardless the circumstances. The goal is to make daily life easier by focusing on the present moment.

mindlessness. As Itai Ivztan and Rona Hart describe, mindlessness is the 'automatic-polite "doing" mode', the 'habitual [...] unregulated mind', whereas mindfulness refers to 'being' and a disciplined mind (Ivtzan & Hart, 2016, p. 4). As such, mindlessness is the state in which 'a person relies on habitual behavioural scripts to perform routine tasks in an automatic and superficial manner' (ibid., p. 14). Kirk Brown and Richard Ryan further denote mindlessness as the relative absence of mindfulness that corresponds to the individual's refusal to 'acknowledge or attend to a thought, emotion, motive or object of perception' (Brown & Ryan, 2003, p. 823). In other words, mindlessness is distraction, whereas mindfulness is the awareness of being present in the moment.

Probably the most notable lack of

Mindfulness is the opposite of

clarity with regard to terminology within

scholarship exists in attempts to differentiate between mindfulness, awareness and presence. Even though many researchers use them interchangeably, I define awareness as the result of the practice of mindfulness rather than its synonym. It is a direct effect from paying attention in a particular way; namely, purposefully, non-judgmentally and in the present moment. It is thereby essential that awareness is a relaxed state that does not require any particular effort but 'flows' naturally.

This differentiates awareness from attention: Attention is the concentrated effort of focusing on perceived elements. It can be seen as the instrument of mindfulness that gives rise to awareness. It thus represents a tool to perform mindful 'being' in contrast to 'doing' and can be executed in varying degrees of focus. Mindfulness is the effortful practice that

leads to effortless awareness and presence. When losing the state of relaxed awareness, which happens very easily through distractions and judgements, the practice of mindfulness, with its focused attention, opens the possibility for it to instantly manifest. As such, mindfulness, attention and awareness are deeply interconnected and mutually depend on each other.

In addition, mindfulness is not equal to presence but rather the prerequisite for it. A state of presence manifests when being aware, with awareness rising from paying attention. Awareness and presence condition each other. Namkhai Norbu explains:

Many important [Buddhist] masters have said, 'Drive the horse of awareness with the whip of presence!' This knowledge is crucial because if awareness is not accompanied by presence, it does not work. Here is an example of awareness: Let's imagine a woman

has a cup full of poison in front of her and is aware of it. Since she knows the danger of the poison, she does not need a lot of explanations about it. She will also warn those who do not know about the danger, saying, 'There is poison in that cup. If you drink it you will die!' [...] Extending the example, we can also understand the meaning of 'presence'. Let's say that the woman, who as we said is aware of the poison in the cup it [sic] and knows the consequences of drinking it, lacks continuous presence. Then, in a moment of distraction, she might accidentally drink the poison. The point is that if awareness is not accompanied by presence it is difficult for it to produce the right results. (Norbu, 2018, p. 48-49)

In this scenario, awareness equals the knowledge of the danger of the poison and presence is the ability to continuously keep this insight. In other words: While awareness is the registration of external and internal stimuli through purposefully paying attention, presence is the capacity to process, filter and use the information in meaningful ways and behave accordingly

to it. Being present can be done in any moment of life:

In order to be present you don't need to go into a temple or take a particular position with your physical body. You don't need to chant a mantra, [...] or do something with your mind: you can be present in anything you do in your life. If you talk with someone and you are present, you know you are talking; if you are walking, you know you are walking; if you are sleeping, you know you are sleeping. Everything you do, when you know you are doing it, this is called presence. (Chögyal Namkhai Norbu, 2021, p.169)

One might legitimately ask what the benefits of heightened states of awareness and presence resulting from the practice of mindfulness are. What is 'wrong' about functioning in automatic mode and relying on habitual and routinized behaviour patterns? Thich Nhat Hahn states that 'mindfulness itself is the life of awareness' and means 'the presence of life', which

'frees us of forgetfulness and dispersion and makes it possible to live fully each minute.' (Hanh, 1975, p. 15) Namkhai Norbu specifies the importance of relaxation that results from mindfulness practice: 'If you are not distracted you can work better, enjoy more, avoid saying and doing things that you know you will regret. You can notice all your tensions and relax them.' (Norbu, 2018, p. 52) He further emphasizes that mindfulness does not only improve one's own wellbeing but enables empathy with others, understanding their needs and thoughts better, facilitating interaction. (Norbu, 2000, p. 145) The promotion of mindfulness in daily life by raising awareness of, and presence to, one's thoughts and behaviour can be considered fundamental to Namkhai Norbu's teachings and suggested practices precisely because of its potential to make life at large easier.

To answer the question: There is nothing 'wrong' with functioning in automatic mode and relying on habitual patterns. However, mindfulness represents a method for enhancing personal growth, avoiding unnecessary suffering, promoting relaxation, developing more empathy with oneself and others as well as finding more joy in life. The manifold effects of mindfulness practice with its result in awareness and presence of outer and inner circumstances become apparent.

I want to stress that mindfulness needs to be consciously practiced by the individual. No institution, no practice, no authority nor any other person can practice paying attention to one's own thoughts. For this reason, the practice of mindfulness is only possible through the commitment of the individual.

While claiming that Khaita facilitates the practice of mindfulness in the following,

I am fully aware that if someone fails to observe their thoughts while practicing Khaita, it is not justifiable to call it a mindfulness practice. Nonetheless, the three principles of awareness that Namkhai Norbu theorized for Khaita serve as concrete guidelines for the practice of mindfulness while dancing Khaita and facilitate the non-judgmental observation process.

The Three Principles of Awareness:

Dems, Gyu, Drig

There are three principles of awareness that Namkhai Norbu established for the Khaita practice and that relate to mindfulness: *Dems* (ཐེངས་, *Idems*), *Gyu* (རྒྱུ, '*gyu*') and *Drig* (འགྲིག, '*grig*').⁴ He encourages Khaita dancers to adhere to these principles:

There are three principles that you should remember about the Khaita dances that we do. The first is what we call in Tibetan *Idem[s]* [*Dem*], which means harmonious, so all movements should be harmonious. This is number one and should not be lacking. The second point is called '*gyu*' [*Gyu*], which means movement, so when you turn to the left or the right or bend forwards, all movements should be harmonious, not only jumping. When they dance some people jump too much. Maybe it is nice but it doesn't correspond with the dance. The last point is '*grig*' [*Drig*], which means that you coordinate all your movements with the music. When, for example, you are dancing in a circle, most people are not in a circle - sometimes people in the circle are very far apart, other times they are very near. [...] Dance should be coordinated. So you should always remember these three: *Idem[s]*, '*gyu*', '*grig*'. (Norbu, 2016)

Dems, *Gyu* and *Drig* represent basic considerations that dancers need to be aware of to make any group dance with fixed choreography 'successful'. The essences of each principle are not exclusive to Khaita as they represent

aspects of proprioception, coordination, spatial and musical awareness that are required in every type of dance. They were, however, explicitly formulated for Khaita and stand in the tradition of Namkhai Norbu's effort to provide tools for self-observation.

***Dems* (ཐེངས་, *Idems*): Smoothness**

The first awareness principle that Namkhai Norbu theorized for the Khaita dances is *Dems*. It refers to the flexible, smooth and harmonious execution of movements. It focuses on the perspective of the individual and, for example, neglects aspects of space and group coordination. It is about the dancer's personal approach to the movement. Namkhai Norbu contrasted the execution of *Dems* with military style movements, describing the quality of Khaita dances: While there are many dance styles that emphasize staccato

movements, the dance quality of Khaita is smooth and fluent, with one movement blending harmoniously into the next, typically without stops. In contrast, military style movements are characterized by abrupt and jerky movements that are generally not present in Khaita dances, with some exceptions of short rap sequences in some songs.

From my personal Khaita dance experience and by observing and teaching people who are beginning to dance Khaita, I know that the principle of *Dems* requires practice and focused attention. When first learning a dance, it happens that the movements appear and feel uneven. Smooth transitions from one movement to the next are missing. With practice and by purposeful attention, one learns to coordinate one's body more harmoniously and fill the musical phrasing with balanced movements.

A good example to illustrate the principle of *Dems* is the combination of basic steps and arms in the dance ‘So Yarelo’⁵ (‘What a Wonder!’). When looking at the Khaita dance demonstration video, dancers execute the movements smoothly, use all the musical timing and evenly transition into the next movement combination. The entire dance therefore appears harmonious and well-balanced. (International Atiyoga Foundation, 2022b)

The combination from ‘So Yarelo’ I focus on here is a series of basic steps (typical of Tibetan folk dance), each starting and ending with the right leg to counts of four. The arms alternate, starting with the right. The respective arm thereby first raises towards the head and slightly along the width-axis (diagonally) and then moves close to the opposite leg at the height of the hips across the body. From there, it opens across the opposite upper torso side

towards the head and then comes back to the side. While finishing the half circle, the other arm prepares, at the height of the head, to do the same on the other side and, without a stop, starts guiding the movement. The fingers are involved and the arms are extended, while the wrists are soft. The movement of the arms is precisely coordinated with the legs and is executed in four counts, finishing when the right leg taps up. In addition to that, the body slightly rotates to the inside and outside of the circle in coordination with the arm movements. The head further moves along with the arms in a relaxed way. The combination is holistic, involving the whole body.

While this movement combination from ‘So Yarelo’ looks easy, it is quite challenging for beginner dancers. It requires precision, coordination, musicality and a sense of relaxation to make the

movements appear harmonious. As such, they demand non-judgmental and purposeful attention.

***Gyu* (འགྱུ, 'gyu): Correspondence**

The second awareness principle established by Namkhai Norbu for the Khaita dance practice is *Gyu*. It refers to coordination within the dancer's body as well as the correspondence to the choreography. This means that if, for example, a choreography requires dancers to raise their right arm, they need to do so, desirably to the correct timing of the music. This requires dancers to be aware of the choreography and pay purposeful attention to it. It also means (re)checking with instructors to compare movements and, if necessary, adjust what one is doing.

Similarly to the principle of *Dems*, *Gyu* is connected to practice. In the beginning, it might be physically impossible

for someone who newly starts with Khaita to coordinate their body according to the required choreography. In this learning process, dedicated attention to oneself as well as to other dances/instructors is necessary to study and perform a dance correctly.

After having practiced the dances and being able to manage their physical coordination, it often happens that Khaita dancers forget choreographies in their specificities. Given that fact that there are around 240 dances with different fixed choreographies, this hardly surprises. In fact, even the most trained Khaita dancers are likely to forget and mix up movements from time to time. It is therefore important to always check with oneself and other expert dancers/instructors as well as the demonstration videos to see if one's own movements correspond to the required choreography. All choreographies were

approved by Namkhai Norbu, recorded in the dance demonstration videos and serve as reference points. Khaita choreographies are therefore codified. Improvised individual movements are neither encouraged nor respected; for example, if the choreography requires the raising of the right arm, dancers need to raise their right arm. If they raise both arms or just the left arm because they feel like doing so or because they think it is the 'better' choreography, the dance cannot be considered part of the Khaita collection anymore. However, considering the principle of *Dems*, there is a certain liberty in how one may raise the right arm, depending on the individuality and dance experience of each body.

Perhaps the reason why Namkhai Norbu so strongly emphasized the principle of *Gyu* for the Khaita dances is related to the fact that there are so many

different choreographies. Given the high number of Khaita dances, he must have anticipated that dancers, even instructors,⁶ would forget or confuse movements. Stressing the principle of *Gyu* as essential for the Khaita practice encourages dancers' self-awareness as well as humility. In scenarios of choreographic disagreements, it is clear that one must first check oneself to see if one is making the right movements before assuming that someone else is making the mistake. When every dancer follows this approach, the group members are likely to be more receptive to each other and hence dance together more harmoniously.

When neither aware of one's own body nor other dancers, it is impossible to coordinate movements as suggested by the principle of *Gyu*. Similarly, it is easy to lose one's presence in the given moment due to thoughts, emotions and judgements

and thus make mistakes. By practicing mindfulness, meaning paying attention purposefully and non-judgmentally to the here and now, this potential is minimized. The principle of *Gyu* thereby directs one's attention to the present moment by encouraging self-observation of one's coordination in correspondence to the choreography.

***Drig* (ଦ୍ରିଗ, 'grig): Space and Musicality**

The third and final principle of awareness in Khaita is *Drig*. *Drig* refers to coordination in space and correspondence to the music. It is not only focused on the individual dancer's perspective but requires awareness of the group, the space, the rhythm and melody provided by the music. The best example to illustrate the principle of *Drig* is the circle formation. A circle cannot be formed alone but requires

collaboration from all dancers. During Khaita practice sessions, it can often be observed that people find it challenging to stay in circle formations. Dancers are often



Figure 1: Example of Drig (International Atiyoga Foundation, 2021) (Khaita website)

too far behind others, too close to one person on one side or too far inside the circle. As I explained when discussing the principles of *Dems* and *Gyu*, it is understandable that new Khaita dancers might not be able to follow the circle formation right away, particularly in choreographies that change the direction of the circle or include many turns.

Keeping a circle formation, however, is also challenging for more experienced dancers because it requires awareness and attention. Understanding one's position in space and in relationship to the group is therefore crucial.

Drig also means correspondence to music and the rhythm proposed by it. Given the fact that Khaita is based on Tibetan music that sounds foreign to the average European listener, it takes time to get used to the melodies and rhythms of the songs. While several Khaita songs are difficult to count and understand rhythmically, most Khaita songs have regular measures. Irregular musical measures are often accompanied with the repetition of movement phrases. When distracted and not focused on the present moment and anticipating music changes, it is easy to miss them.

A Khaita dance that illustrates the

principle of *Drig* well is 'Gangchenpa'⁷ ('Inhabitants of the Land of Snow'). It belongs to the group of Tashi songs.⁸ It is often danced at the end of Khaita practice sessions and is popular amongst the dancers, yet is challenging to master. While the movements themselves are relatively simple, the dance requires spatial and rhythmical awareness and group collaboration to be successful.

'Gangchenpa' is danced in two circles with an equal number of people. The outside circle faces and moves clockwise and the inside circle faces and moves counterclockwise. (International Atiyoga Foundation, 2022a) The song can be structured in musical parts as well as two variations of singing phrases that repeat until the end.

In the musical part, dancers move rhythmically along the direction of their circle with arms rotating to the side. With

every second movement that corresponds to every second musical bar, dancers meet another person from the opposite circle. The arms and hands are directed at the other person and dancers have a moment to look at each other (see Figure 3). Alternately, the outside circle performs the same movement towards the outside and the inner circle towards the inside. In this case, there is no direct meeting with another person. However, due to the proximity of the inside circle, dancers in the inside circle may directly look at the person opposite them who is also dancing in the inside circle. People dancing outside interact with the audience, if present.

The singing parts alternate between dancers moving along their respective circle and merging to one circle. When merging, direct meetings with other dancers happen for a brief time, dictated by the music. Dancers therefore need to

be aware of their spacing and not only ensure that they merge into a balanced, unified circle but also respect the logic of this merging: in the first two bars, dancers perform their movements alone in their respective circle (see Figure 4).

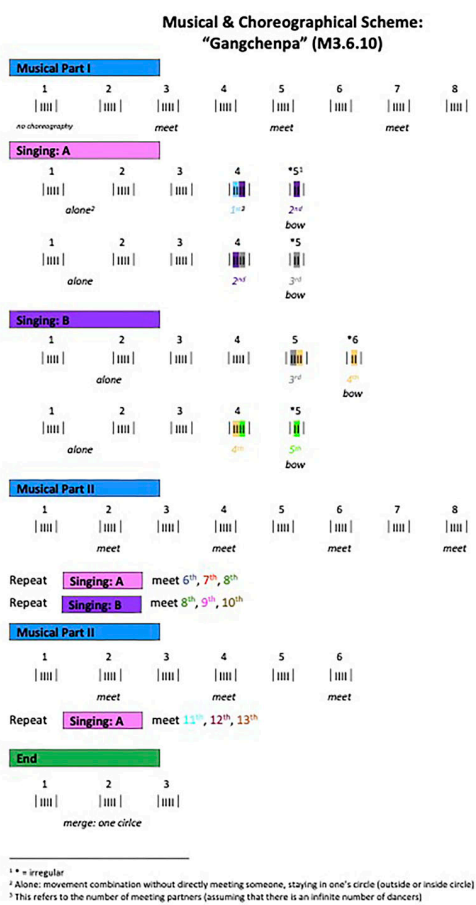


Figure 2: Musical and choreographic scheme of 'Gangchenpa' (Schema by the author).

In the next bar, dancers merge into one circle. In two counts, dancers then turn to the opposite direction of their initial circle, which leads to a meeting with a person from the other circle. After this, dancers turn again and face yet another person from the opposite circle. With two extra beats, dancers execute a form of bow to each other and hold both palms in front of their hearts (see Figure 5). This is a respectful gesture and can be read as an appreciative greeting of the other person.⁹

After this first meeting, dancers continue moving along the direction of their initial circle without directly meeting anyone. The unified circle is thereby dissolved and the two circles from the beginning become clearly visible. This again requires spatial awareness. Then the merging repeats as before. In this sequence, the person that one just bowed to is the first person of the first turn that

one meets, since both circles continue moving forward when not unified. For the next bow, one meets a new person from the opposite circle.

This pattern continues until the end of the singing part. There is, however, a musical irregularity that occurs after the second bow. This is a challenging moment in the choreography because dancers now perform the movement combination that they usually carry out when meeting and bowing to another person alone. Here, dancers need to focus attentively on their movements, the music and their position in space as well as their relation to the other dancers. Mistakes often happen at this point, with dancers wrongly attempting to merge into one circle and thus losing the formation or neglecting musicality. After the irregular phrase, the dance continues with the regular pattern of moving alone along the circle, merging, turning to one

person, turning in the opposite direction to another person and bowing in front of them.

After the first singing part, the musical part with the same choreography repeats from the beginning. Another singing part with the described specificities follows, with yet another musical part after that. In contrast to the previous two musical parts, the third one, however, only lasts for six bars. Following this, the regular singing phrase with the meeting of three different dancers repeats. At the end, both circles merge, with alternated positions of dancers from the initial outside and inside circles (see Figure 6). All dancers now face towards the centre of the circle and complete the dance with closed palms above their hearts.

Assuming that there is an infinite, equal number of dancers in both circles (when the space is sufficient, circle

formations do not have an upper limit), from an individual perspective, one dancer can meet a maximum of thirteen different others at the meeting points. If the number of the dancers is lower, as, for example, in the dance demonstration video with six people, one meets the same persons several times.

Because of these choreographic meetings, 'Gangchenpa' is a highly interactive dance. From my own dance experience, I can testify that it is challenging. Even when executing one's steps correctly, the dance only works when all dancers collaborate and respect formation and spacing. This can be frustrating and patience is required. It usually takes more than one attempt to perform the dance during practice sessions. At the same time, it can be extremely joyful to dance 'Gangchenpa', as one interacts closely with several dancers.

In addition, mastering the choreography provides a sense of accomplishment.

The dance works through the collaboration of the entire group and everyone's awareness of movements, space and musicality. In this, it perfectly embodies the principle of *Drig*. When distracted, in the sense of not paying attention to the present moment, mistakes in the choreography occur. These commonly lead to confusion in the entire group. Furthermore, the speed of the meetings and the choreographic changes push one to stay focused and concentrated on what is happening here and now. The swiftness of the dance does not allow for distractions.

Respecting the three principles of *Dems*, *Gyu* and *Drig* when dancing Khaita can be quite challenging. Beginner dancers, on the one hand, usually struggle most with the physical coordination, the

organisation in space and within the dancing group. While this requires one to be attentive to what is going on within and around oneself, it is also difficult to observe one's mind in a non-judgemental way when trying to manage many things at the same time. More experienced dancers, on the other hand, might switch to 'automatic mode', rely on their body memory of previous dancing and get distracted during the Khaita practice. That means that they do not pay purposeful attention to the present moment. When dancing Khaita, both scenarios are to be expected; firstly, because there are several choreographies with different levels of difficulty and individual familiarity and secondly, because individuals' conditions and capacities change on a daily basis due to emotions, stress or physical wellbeing.

Keeping the three principles of awareness in mind and purposefully trying

to remember them when dancing Khaita may thus function as reminders to come back to the here and now, to pay attention to the present moment in a non-judgemental way and consequently to relax in the movement and sound of Khaita.



Figure 3: Meeting during Musical Part (1)



Figure 4: Movement without meeting (2)



Figure 5: Bow meeting (3)



Figure 6: End position (4)

(All images: International Atiyoga Foundation, 2022a)

Conclusion

I conclude that Khaita can be perceived and used as a mindfulness practice when adhering to three principles of awareness. *Dems*, *Gyu* and *Drig* serve as guidelines for the dance practice and revolve around

aspects of proprioception, smoothness, musicality, spatial and group awareness. They direct one's attention to the here and now.

While the three principles are easy to understand conceptually, their application in the dances is challenging. They require purposeful attention, awareness and presence on what is happening at the moment and focus on one's surrounding. In other words: they require and cultivate mindfulness, the non-judgmental, purposeful and non-reactive attention paid to the present moment that results in heightened states of presence and awareness. The observation of one's thoughts while dancing is necessary to successfully embody the three principles.

The benefits of practicing mindfulness are manifold and include personal growth, relaxation and joy in life.

As such, the aim of practicing Khaita as a

method of mindfulness is not only the successful management of dances but bringing the benefits from the cultivation of mindfulness to one's daily life. The time dedicated to the dances can serve as a maturation of one's mindfulness practice that is useful in all aspects of life.

Notes

1. Elsewhere, Adriano Clemente explains: "Dzogchen, a Tibetan word that means 'total perfection' or 'absolute completeness' is the name of a spiritual teaching found in both the Bön and the Ancient Buddhist traditions of Tibet, where it is considered the highest path of realization, due to its direct and clear presentation of the nature of mind as the source of all phenomena of existence and to its special methods for accomplishing its potentiality. The meaning of Dzogchen refers to this real, self-perfected nature of each individual, [...] and the scope of this teaching is to reveal directly and experientially the state of 'Dzogchen' so that this knowledge becomes wholly integrated into one's life and behavior." (Clemente, 2016, p. 1)

2. Jon Kabat-Zinn summarizes it the following: "And that is what meditation is all about...the systematic and intentional cultivation of mindful presence, and through it, of wisdom, compassion, and other qualities of mind and

heart conducive to breaking free from the fetters of our own persistent blindness and delusions. The attentional stance [...] has been described by Nyanaponika Thera as ‘the heart of Buddhist meditation.’ It is central to all the Buddha’s teachings and to all the Buddhist traditions, from the many currents and streams of Zen in China, Korea, Japan, and Vietnam, to the various schools of vipassana or ‘insight meditation’ in the Theravada tradition native to Burma, Cambodia, Thailand, and Sri Lanka, to those of Tibetan (Vajrayana) Buddhism in India, Tibet, Nepal, Ladakh, Bhutan, Mongolia, and Russia. And now, virtually all of these schools and their attendant traditions have established firm roots in the cultures of the West, where they are presently flourishing.” (Kabat-Zinn, 2015: 1482)

3. This refers to the Four Noble Truths that are central in all Buddhist traditions. Namkhai Norbu explains them in condensed form: “1) The Truth of Suffering: Buddha taught this truth because everybody knows suffering. Everybody has experienced illnesses, problems, the death of a loved one, and so on. [...] 2) The Truth of the Cause: To be free of suffering, it is important to understand its cause, where suffering comes from. In general, we do not attempt to recognize its sources. Instead, when we have a problem, we try to eliminate it, we fight it. But we can never win. Even if we overcome one problem, we will have another. [...] If we really want to overcome them, we must discover their cause. Once we do, we can go forward. [...] 3) The Truth of Cessation: If, for example, we discover that the root of all suffering is our dualistic mind, our attachment to things that are impermanent, we can choose to renounce

them. [...] We renounce the cause of all negativities, and our suffering stops. [...] But the degree of success we can have depends on the condition of the individual. Some people have more capacity, some people less. That is why Buddha explained the fourth noble truth: that there is a path to follow. 4) The Truth of the Path: Many paths exist, [for example], the Sutra, [the path of renunciation] [...]: It means controlling our three gates. With our body, voice and mind, we renounce negative actions, words, and thoughts. When we consistently avoid acting in a negative way, we stop accumulating causes for suffering. [...]” (Norbu, 2018: 27-29)

4. From Tibetan: Dem, actually ‘Idems’ (འཇམས་): literally ‘flex’ (Tibetan-English Dictionary Christian Steinert, n.d.); Gyu, actually “gyu’ (རྒྱུ): literally ‘movement’, ‘stirring’, also ‘thinking’ (Tibetan-English Dictionary Christian Steinert, n.d.); Drig, actually “grig’ (རྒྱུག): literally ‘compilation’, ‘to fit/suit’, ‘to agree/to be in harmony’ (Tibetan-English Dictionary Christian Steinert, n.d.). In the following, I refer to the simple Draijor spelling of the terms.

5. T3.09. This number refers to the categorization of the song in the Khaita collections that can be accessed in the Khaita App via khaita.com.

6. Currently, there are sixty certified instructors that are allowed to teach Khaita – Joyful Dances.

7. M3.6.10

8. Within the Khaita collection, there are numerous Tashi songs and dances. They are

said to evoke auspiciousness. ‘Tashi’, short for ‘draxis xog’ (བཏེན་མོག་), thereby literally means ‘may all be auspicious’ (Tibetan-English Dictionary Christian Steinert, n.d.). Tashi songs and dances are usually performed at the end of Khaita dance sessions or for special events such as celebrations etc. The last group in the Metreng collection (M3.6.01-10) consists of Tashi songs and dances only.

9. Since the song lyrics is formulated as a prayer of auspiciousness, the mudra, hand gesture, of putting the palms together in front of the heart also symbolizes praying. The fourth stanza of the song, for example, says: “May your body be healthy and spread radiance! May your voice sing praises without interruption! May your mind be free of illusions and be merged with the Dharma! May this Land, the Land of Snow, be peaceful and happy now and in the time to come!” (International Atiyoga Foundation, 2022a)

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