



## The Action of Attention: Intersections of Contemplative Dance Performance and Sufi Remembrance

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### KEYWORDS

Contemplative dance  
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### ABSTRACT

This reflection considers how the deep attention cultivated in the Sufi contemplative practice of remembrance, or ذکر (*dhikr*), might support my capacity to serve the world through my actions as a performer. By reflecting on the contemplative dance film *in existence or in absence* created during the *Seminário Artes da Cena e Práticas Contemplativas: Contemplação, Artes Performativas e Convivência*, this text explores ways in which attention itself could be a meaningful action in the world.

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### Introduction

The Center for Contemplative Mind in Society describes contemplative practices as, ‘practical, radical, and transformative, developing capacities for deep concentration and quieting the mind in the midst of the action and distraction that fills everyday life’ (CMIND 2015). With the ever-escalating array of difficulties in the world, many artists and contemplatives find ourselves poised to engage those contemplative practices not only to

manifest inner quiet amidst the aforementioned ‘action and distraction’ of life but also to bring those transformative capacities into more explicit service in the everyday world. In this reflection, I consider how the deep attention cultivated in the Sufi contemplative practice of remembrance, or ذکر (*dhikr*), might support my capacity to serve the world through my actions as a performer. More specifically, this text explores ways in which attention itself could be a meaningful action in the

world by reflecting on the contemplative dance film *in existence or in absence* created during the *Seminário Artes da Cena e Práticas Contemplativas: Contemplação, Artes Performativas e Convivência*, hosted by Universidade Federal de Santa Maria, Brazil in May 2021.

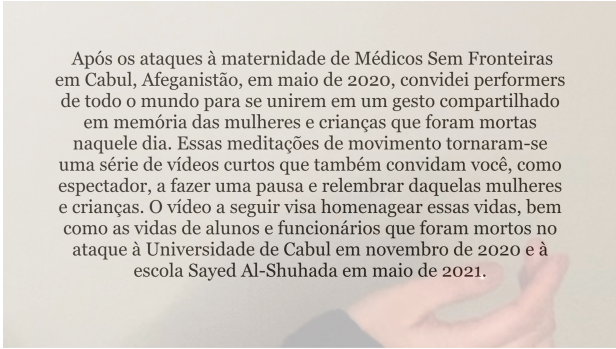
As an artistic activist and contemplative student of Sufism, I regularly find myself engaged in a perceived tension between being and doing—attention and action. This conjunction of contemplative practice and artistic activism reached a pinnacle one Friday during a jumma service at my local mosque when the imam posed the following question to the congregation: ‘If our practices aren’t helping us become better people, then why are we doing them?’ The contemplative practices of Sufism help me to orient myself not only in relation to a transcendent Divinity but also to an immanent One whose presence can be felt

in this world, including in the ways we relate and are in service to other people. Additionally, as an artist, creative practices and states experienced during performance shape and are shaped by my spiritual engagement. Since childhood, performance has been a practice that has helped me to become a better person. The states of consciousness and presence that performance simultaneously conjures and demands have allowed me to be the most receptive, patient, generous, compassionate, and attentive person I know how to be. After working for many years to transpose who I was onstage into my everyday life, I now actively look to the practice of performance to facilitate my growth as both an artist and a citizen—to help me become a better person.

However, it was not until engaging in conversation with other artists and audiences at *Seminário Artes da Cena e Práticas Contemplativas* that I understood how that growth might appear for me at the

intersections of Sufism and contemplative dance. As with all traditions, followers of Islam do not hold a monolithic perspective on practices, and some may see an inherent religious conflict between dance and Sufism. Yet, these two traditions together expand my understanding of mindfulness in and of the world around me—particularly through the action of attention. The film *in existence or in absence* uses attention to create a space for remembering lives lost and to allow those gathered in that space of remembrance to grieve. The remainder of this text explores three intersections that I discovered between Sufi practices of remembrance and the creation/performance of this contemplative dance film, including connections between individual and group practice, quality of loving attention, and performance as an invitation for the audience's contemplative engagement.

## Alone Together in Remembrance



Após os ataques à maternidade de Médicos Sem Fronteiras em Cabul, Afeganistão, em maio de 2020, convidei performers de todo o mundo para se unirem em um gesto compartilhado em memória das mulheres e crianças que foram mortas naquele dia. Essas meditações de movimento tornaram-se uma série de vídeos curtos que também convidam você, como espectador, a fazer uma pausa e relembrar daquelas mulheres e crianças. O vídeo a seguir visa homenagear essas vidas, bem como as vidas de alunos e funcionários que foram mortos no ataque à Universidade de Cabul em novembro de 2020 e à escola Sayed Al-Shuhada em maio de 2021.

Figure 1: Film still featuring Daniela Cunha (Salyers 2020)

After the brutal attacks on a Doctors Without Borders Maternity Ward in Kabul, Afghanistan in May 2020, thoughts of those who experienced such terror continually permeated my awareness and my practices. This constant reminder moved me to initiate the contemplative dance project *in existence or in absence*. The title of the project references a poem by renowned Sufi teacher Jalal ad-Din Muhammad Balkhi (also known as Rumi), an excerpt of which is present within the film in both Pashto and English. Bringing together performers from around the world in a shared gesture of remembrance, the project seeks to honour the many women, children, and health professionals who lost

their lives in the attack. Because the performers were in the midst of the early days of the Covid-19 pandemic and scattered throughout the world, we each filmed our movement meditations based on an improvisational structure that I provided. I then collected all of the individual videos and edited them into a series of films featuring different groups of performers. During the development of the project, three additional devastating attacks—on Kabul University as well as an educational centre and the Sayed al-Shuhada girl’s school in the same Kabul neighbourhood as the maternity ward—necessitated including remembrance of these students in the series as well when the film with Brazilian performers was created in 2021. While this creative work may only be a small act of care, the other performers and I were moved to make the time to be in remembrance of these lives, especially when attention to them could be lost amidst the tragedies unfolding everywhere

around us.

For the Brazilian version of the film, one gesture is carried out across five bodies and geographical locations. As the motion progresses, it does not attempt to innovate or surprise. Instead, the movement deliberately follows a predictable trajectory with the hope that performer and viewer can be present on that path together. The intention upon completion of the project was to share it with friends who ran an artist collective in Kabul so that in showing it to their community, they would know they have not been forgotten. With the swift Taliban takeover of Afghanistan which resulted in many artists having to flee the country or go into hiding, the film has unfortunately not yet been shown to the community in Kabul. When shared with the Brazilian audience, however, it took on unexpected significance as viewers commented that it established a space that allowed them to grieve the loss of loved ones to Covid-19.

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Because I wanted to create a work that could simultaneously hold grief and hope, I relied on my experience with Sufi practices to help me balance two qualities that might seem oppositional. While creating an artistic memorial initially may appear quite different than Islamic practices invoking God, both forms of ‘remembrance’ engage the individual in deep consideration of something beyond themselves. The connection between individual concentration and vast awareness of what is beyond the self provides a way of recognizing the interconnection and embedded nature of the self in the world. If ‘dhikr is a way of dealing with life and the cosmos’, then this film is also a type of dhikr—a way of recognizing and reconciling tragedy in the world through loving attention and remembrance (Al-Rawi, 2021).

This project brought together a deeper understanding of the connection between my practices in Sufism and dance

as well as what I hope to do through them in the world. As noted by one of the most prominent Islamic scholars and mystics, Abu Hamid Muhammad ibn Muhammad at-Tusiyy al-Ghazali, in Islam ‘the inner secret and the core of all of the acts of worship is remembrance’ (2012). While dhikr exists as a practice for all Muslims, ‘the physical act of remembering God has become the central, ritual activity for all Sufis, though the actual form and function of the dhikr varies drastically depending on the order’ (Azlan, 2005, p. 216). Many Sufi orders engage in vocal or silent repetition of phrases or Divine Names as forms of dhikr, but the Mevlevi order also practices the well-known whirling dance of سماع (Sama) as an aspect of their remembrance. Regardless of the particular appearance of dhikr, the function of these activities—similar to practices in other wisdom traditions—seeks a purification of the ego self and transformation of one’s human characteristics into more Divine,

refined form. For Sufi Muslims, the practice of dhikr forms the foundation of contemplative life and deepening relationship with God, as well as an orientation towards how to be in the world. While remembrance practices cultivate and require inner consciousness as well as occasional retreat from the world, they do not seek to create separation between human beings and their surroundings. As Islamic scholar and dancer Rosina Fawzia al-Rawi discusses, 'the focus is always on everyday life, dealing with fellow human beings and deeds' (2015, p. 11). In the case of dhikr, this everyday can be 'the true arena for practice and reflection' (Al-Rawi, 2015, p. 11). As philosopher Marc Applebaum points out, the action of remembrance requires human effort as 'heedlessness (*ghaflah*) is viewed as the ordinary human condition, and therefore becoming heedful is framed as the primary ethical challenge in the refinement of relational ethics, *adab*, and the formation

of good character, *akhlaq*' (Applebaum, 2019, p. 24). In this manner, the effort of engaging in dhikr inherently addresses the aforementioned question posed by the imam. The essential design of the practice is to help one to become a better person. For the individual engaged in remembrance meditation, 'the lived experience of dhikr is that not of a practice but of a tectonic shift in the meditator's lived sense of identity, the implications of which are simultaneously ontological as well as psychological' (Applebaum, 2019, p. 27). Similarly, this project provided a tectonic shift for me as an artist and contemplative as it impressed upon me the important potential of communal meditation practices. Although I have engaged in comparable works engaging contemplative dance and artistic activism in the past, including collaborations with a theatre company in Palestine, an artist collective in Afghanistan, and a movement for healing bodies of water in the United States, the

resulting works themselves have been solo performances. This project was one of the first times that I asked other performers to move with me. Because of the pandemic, we each experienced our moments of live performance before the camera as solos, but the final product necessarily combines those solos into a group movement meditation. Although communal dhikr is familiar to me in Sufi practices, I had not extended this idea into my contemplative dance works. Yet, Sufism teaches that the communal component is vital for the aforementioned development of the individual, such that even ‘an individual practice is inextricably connected to the social world surrounding the particular person who undertakes it’ (Bashir, 2013, p. 210). The presence and spirit of the community at Seminário Artes da Cena e Práticas Contemplativas taught me what performance artist Helene Vosters aptly states, that ‘mourning is not a solo performance; it’s a collective undertaking’

(Vosters, 2014, p.37). The Brazilian version of the performance was additionally unique because the contributing artists (Daniela Cunha, José Renato Noronha, Vinicius Terra, and Alba Vieira) did not know me when I issued the invitation to participate. They joined from their own contemplative traditions to offer performance in honour of these Afghan citizens—to devote loving attention to their memory.

### **Loving Attention in Remembrance**



Figure 2: Film still featuring José Renato Noronha (Salyers 2020)

As Ali Hassan and Jennifer Kayle describe in discussion of ensemble improvisation performance, to do something together necessitates that ‘the intended behaviors

must coalesce, not by coincidence, nor merely by some external force; the coalescing behaviors must occur because it is something that is, at some level, *collectively intended or aimed at* (2021, p. 147). In the case of *in existence or in absence*, performers collectively intended to remember and honour the people who were experiencing these attacks in Afghanistan. Similar to the work of Helene Vosters as well as her predecessor Anna Halprin, the movement score that I gave performers ‘tells participants what to do, [but] it does not tell them how to do it, how to feel, or what to think. This approach enables ensemble cohesion without limiting personal expression, experience, and agency, thereby cultivating a process of polyvocal meaning-making’ (Vosters, 2014, p. 35). Although the backgrounds of performers in this film include diverse contemplative traditions, the performance could coalesce into one continuous gesture because of the quality of attention

consistent among the performers, even though the meaning may have differed for each of us. Remembrance is not simply recalling, but rather both the action and the quality of attention applied to it. In Sufism, remembrance is an act of love, ‘as attributed to the Prophet Muhammad: “The command to remember much is a command to love for that is in the tradition, One who loves something remembers it often,”’ (Applebaum, 2019, p. 25). This practical approach to the motivation behind remembrance also appeared for me in the creation of *in existence or in absence*. As I questioned how dance could be a meaningful way to memorialize these Afghan civilians and doubted that I was the appropriate person to do so, I realized that I have a desire to hold the situation with loving attention. Even this attitude is influenced by Sufi practices, because the loving attention that I have cultivated through Sufi remembrance has given me



the capacity to care more deeply about others and the world around me.

Although this loving attention often may be considered a sentiment reserved for the Divine, many traditions do not separate enactment of love in the world from enactment of love for the Divine. Remembrance is not an isolated practice but 'must also be carried by deeds, thoughts, and emotions, failing which it becomes a mere game of self-delusion and self-centeredness' (Al-Rawi, 2015, p.53). How could I engage in these contemplative practices meant to soften the heart and expand consciousness and then not be affected by the difficulties that others are facing? Al-Rawi explains that, 'When we practice dhikr, our little "me" disappears, together with its fears and limitations, and we stop being selfish' (Al-Rawi, 2021). Even if one cannot completely alleviate the suffering of others, an expansion of awareness can inspire desire to be of service to fellow humans,

and both Islamic and Christian texts reflect care for humans as a type of care for the Divine as demonstrated in the following remarkably similar passages from hadith and the Bible.

Allah (mighty and sublime be He) will say on the Day of Resurrection: 'O son of Adam, I fell ill and you visited Me not.' He will say: 'O Lord, and how should I visit You when You are the Lord of the worlds?' He will say: 'Did you not know that My servant So-and-so had fallen ill and you visited him not? Did you not know that had you visited him you would have found Me with him? O son of Adam, I asked you for food and you fed Me not.' He will say: 'O Lord, and how should I feed You when You are the Lord of the worlds?' He will say: 'Did you not know that My servant So-and-so asked you for food and you fed him not? Did you not know that had you fed him you would surely have found that (the reward for doing so) with Me? O son of Adam, I asked you to give Me to drink and you gave Me not to drink.' He will say: 'O Lord, how should I give You to drink when You are the Lord of the worlds?' He will say: 'My servant So-and-so asked you to give him to drink and you gave him not to drink. Had you given him to drink you would have surely found that with Me.' (Al-Ghazali, 1997, p.88)

'For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me

in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.' Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?' The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.' (Matthew 25:35-40)

This notion of service has influenced my own artistic drive to create performances that remember people. In the case of *in existence or in absence*, my goal was to create a space of sustained attention in honour of those killed, as well as to provide the completed films to those left behind as evidence that they have not been forgotten. As a member of the Kabul community remarked in an interview as he made his way to the hospital to donate blood after yet another attack on this neighbourhood, 'They are among the poorest people, in Barchi, living simple

lives, and yet look at what they still have to face because no one is paying attention' (Latifi, 2021). While it is clear that his embodied giving as well as his attention (and further call for others to pay attention) can be applied immediately in service to this community, does the attention created by contemplative dance actually accomplish anything meaningful? Obviously, contemplative dance has not resulted in cessation of attacks on the people of Kabul, so the voice of humanitarian service within me doubts there is any efficacy to it at all. At the same time, my experience with the Brazilian audience revealed an unexpected significance—that of creating a space for collective mourning, both connected to and beyond the events in Kabul. Most artistic activism strives not only to move the hearts and minds of viewers but also to inspire the audience to action; that is, to have an 'effective affect' (Duncombe & Lambert, 2021, p. 29). This dance film does not ask

the audience to do something, but perhaps it creates space for allowing both performers and audience to not only give loving attention to others but also to give a type of loving attention to themselves—a concentrated time to grieve without the expectation to do more.

### Invitations in Remembrance



Figure 3: Film still featuring Alba Vieira and José Renato Noronha (Salyers 2020)

Although much dhikr is practiced either communally or in the presence of a teacher, few Sufi remembrance practices are witnessed by non-participants, with the exception of Sama in contemporary times. Herein lies a primary difference between this dance film and a strictly Sufi form of remembrance—the presence of an

audience. However, another connection exists. As previously mentioned in this text, remembrance aids in the development of adab, which Applebaum defines as ‘relational ethics’ (2019, p. 26). Although adab is frequently considered to be a type of politeness between people, ‘The primary meaning of the root is “to invite”’ (Murata & Chittick, 2006, p. 248). This etymology inspires the public presentation of *in existence or in absence*. When shared publicly, the opening frames of the film gives viewers an invitation to pause and remember those lost. As a public invitation to gather together and to remember, the film takes on the role of a brief memorial. Contemplative dance is not unique in facilitating memorial experiences, so in what way is it useful? Perhaps what contemplative dance can offer in this respect involves further development of that invitation and relationship through kinesthetic empathy between the viewers and the performers. Although the audience

might not be able to feel direct understanding of the circumstances in Kabul, the performers serve as a medium of connection to the grieving inherent in the situation. Movement as memorial also has the ability to demonstrate and empower visible transformation rather than existing as an object fixed in time, space, and history.

Not only does dance illustrate literal and metaphorical movement, contemplative practices also have the ability to move us—intellectually, imaginatively, emotionally, physically, spiritually, and communally. Just as I have experienced performance as a vital state of consciousness for helping me to become a better person, this film trusts in performance's transformative power as an embodied, meditative practice for groups, including both performers and audience members. As the research data from the 'International Peace Project in the Middle East' reveals, meditation by even 1% of a

population positively correlates with a dramatic reduction in violence (Orme-Johnson, et. al, 1988). Therefore, although the presentation of this film was not seeking quantitative data to prove its usefulness, its function as a gathering space emerges from belief in the efficacy of people engaged in meditative practices together. As Orme-Johnson and fellow authors extended their work further, they discovered that this impact of group meditation can expand beyond the location of the meditators to encompass a larger geographical area. Following concentrated group mediation in East Jerusalem, the researchers were able to track positive change throughout Israel, Palestine, and even Lebanon, leading them to conclude that, 'societal change can be initiated at a distance via an abstract field of collective consciousness' (Orme-Johnson, et. al, 1988, p. 806). While this film's goals are not as lofty as achieving societal change in any of the countries featured, it does seek

to change something for those who directly witness it. Citing Orme-Johnson's study in relation to contemplative artistic practices, musician Ed Sarath propels the notion that 'When individuals penetrate to the deepest dimensions of individual consciousness they enliven the collective and its transformative properties' (Sarath, 2016, p.94). This dance film initially meant to let the people of Kabul know that they have not been forgotten. Instead, it became a space for remembering all those who have been lost in the lives of the audience. At Seminário Artes da Cena e Práticas Contemplativas, artists came together across a diversity of wisdom traditions, but performance was our shared practice. One gesture—spanning time, locations, and bodies—became a collective transformation of mourning when witnessed by this audience who engaged in watching the performance as a means of contemplative practice for themselves.

## Conclusions



Figure 4: Film still featuring Candice Salyers (Salyers 2020)

While writing this text, I witnessed yet another news report featuring a Palestinian man expressing his frustration that, 'no one is paying attention' to the destruction that daily affects his life and country (Joumaa, 2019). His words remain with me as I consider the wealth of attention I have been given through my practices. As a performer and contemplative, I spend many hours every day cultivating attention and know I must continue asking myself where and how I am applying that attention in the world. Using such attention to create performance works that seek to honour lives in circumstances different than one's own necessitates rigorous questioning of

one's motives, one's privilege, and one's blind spots as well as the needs and desires of those one is attempting to acknowledge. Although not a focus of this text, such questions were important throughout the creative process. At the same time, if such questioning prevents me from acting, then the vitality of attention may be lost in the next news cycle and successive global conflict until it appears again that no one is paying attention.

Human conflict buries beauty, both literally and metaphorically. By obscuring people's ability to see goodness in each other, conflict consumes the imagination while weapons reduce both living and constructed environments to rubble. Artists, and particularly contemplative artists, are uniquely equipped to sustain our attention for imagining, uncovering, and rebuilding beauty as well as helping others to do so. Similarly, Sufism seeks 'manifestation of ihsan, of doing what is beautiful or, more accurately, of being what

is beautiful' (Murata & Chittick, 2006, p.247). At this intersection of contemplative dance and Sufism lives the beauty of helping people to remember their shared, sacred humanity.

While an artistic gesture of beauty may seem small, it offers audiences and artists a meaningful opportunity to pause, to care about, and to give attention to the significance of lives lost and people facing extreme difficulties in the world. As artistic activists Steve Lambert and Steve Duncombe propose, 'Art is highly effective at translating events, facts, and ideologies into stories, images, and performances, making objective things into subjective forms we can experience, feel, and, importantly, remember' (2021, p. 25). Yet, in consideration of a foundational tenet of artistic activism—that raising awareness is not enough—I continually question if cultivating spaces for loving attention is enough of an effort to constitute meaningful social action (Duncombe &

Lambert, 2021, p. 265). Similarly, Islamic hadith proposes, 'Whosoever of you sees an evil, let him change it with his hand; and if he is not able to do so, then [let him change it] with his tongue; and if he is not able to do so, then with his heart—and that is the weakest of faith' (An-Nawawi, 2021, p. 100). While this attention of the heart may be the weakest action, it is still considered a method of evoking change. At the same time, Sufism provides a useful balancing point for a world consumed with habitual action. In his *Book of Wisdom*, Sufi master Ibn 'Ata'llah writes, 'Actions are lifeless forms, but the presence of an inner reality of sincerity within them is what endows them with life-giving Spirit' (1978, p.48). Such inner reality of sincerity is both one of the steps towards and one of the fruits of cultivating attention. In consideration of the imam's question presented at the beginning of this article, it is attention and presence of heart that inspires me to be a better person. Because

I do not want anyone to feel forgotten, I am motivated to 'do more' as a performer. This pursuit of 'more' does not indicate that attention itself is lacking or that 'changing an evil with one's heart' is inadequate. Rather, attention can open space for an ever-emerging ethics of engagement between performance and the world it both reflects on and serves.

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