

*“This Very Body is the Bodhi Tree”:*

*The Performance of Contemplative States in the Western Jhāna Revival*

*& Contemporary Movement Theater*

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*Abstract*

This dissertation analyzes the methods and experiences of two groups of contemplative practitioners, experienced Buddhist meditators and experimental modern dancers, in relation to their work with states of consciousness. Both cohorts intentionally cultivate altered or heightened states as part of their process, where “state” is defined as the overall present condition of the entity, and describes the most prominent, or most relevant for a given task, characteristic(s) present. The introduction situates states within a preliminary taxonomy of five types of activity: fluctuating, volitional, state, identity, and existence. This taxonomy is based on the Early Buddhist doctrine of Specific Conditionality, and proposes a conditional, but not causative, relationship between the types of activity, emphasizing the non-linear relationship between volitional action and state shift. The first chapter explores the Early Buddhist meditative discipline of *jhāna*, specific states of deep meditative absorption. Analysis of texts on *jhāna* from the Theravāda Buddhist Pāli Canon suggests a taxonomy of states as “spectra of experience,” supporting a phenomenological analysis of Buddhist concentration practice. Chapter two analyzes the experiences of contemporary Buddhist meditators skilled in *jhāna*, bringing the complexity of real practitioners to the analysis of *jhāna* as a system of state cultivation. The chapter elaborates on the doctrinal descriptions of the *jhāna* states by describing in detail the experience of profound meditative Absorption.

Chapter three presents historical summaries of four lineages of live movement-based theater as initiators of “State Work” in contemporary dance and performance art. The work of Constantin Stanislavski, Jerzy Grotowski, Tatsumi Hijikata and Kazuo Ohno (Butoh), and Steve Paxton and Deborah Hay of the Judson Dance Theater, is analyzed in relation to the cultivation of contemplative states in rehearsal and performance. In contrast to the Buddhist meditators, who cultivate sensory seclusion and deep one-pointed focus, these artist ancestors, each influenced by material from Asian sources (mostly Buddhist and Hindu/Yoga), all cultivate a form of relaxed sensory attention called Open Embodied Awareness. The methods of State Work used by these “ancestors” is analyzed, focusing on work with inner image, especially of emptying the body, and shifting the mover’s relationship to sensory information. Embodied concentration in movement is contrasted to the one-pointedness in stillness cultivated by the meditators. Chapter four presents case studies of the work of contemporary dance and performance artists Sara Shelton Mann, Keith Hennessy, Meg Stuart, Jesse Hewit, and Robert Steijn, revealing a shift away from Open Embodied Attention as a core practice toward states of “trance”, including spirit possession, magic, and communal ritual. Issues of “realness” become central to State Work as the performance situation moves further from presentational and expression-oriented theater into realms of participatory group practice. The dissertation concludes with hypotheses around the relationship of State Work in the arts to goals of liberation or realization enunciated in the Buddhist tradition, and presents a short description of my own performance work as an example of Buddhist-influenced contemplative performance.