

# Permissive Movement as a Dharma Door

BRIAN KIMMEL

## *From Yoga to Buddhism: Finding a Path*

Twenty years ago, at age sixteen, I began a quest to find meaning in movement and meditation as an integrated path. I had passed my first quarter of six in hatha yoga at Everett Community College in Washington State. I was receiving college credit there as a high school student in place of Physical Education (PE). I mark my insistence on taking yoga instead of PE as the beginning of my spiritual path. I knew deep down that the health of the body depended upon more than physical exercises, but on all aspects of a person's life. I learned, through the mentoring of my first yoga teacher, Marsha Valentine, about the "Five Principles" including: proper diet, relaxation, breathing, concentration practices, and physical exercises.<sup>1</sup> The aspect that I loved most in yoga and was easily drawn toward was meditation. Marsha noticed this inclination and introduced me to the teachings of Thich Nhat Hanh. It was then that my interest in Buddhism grew.

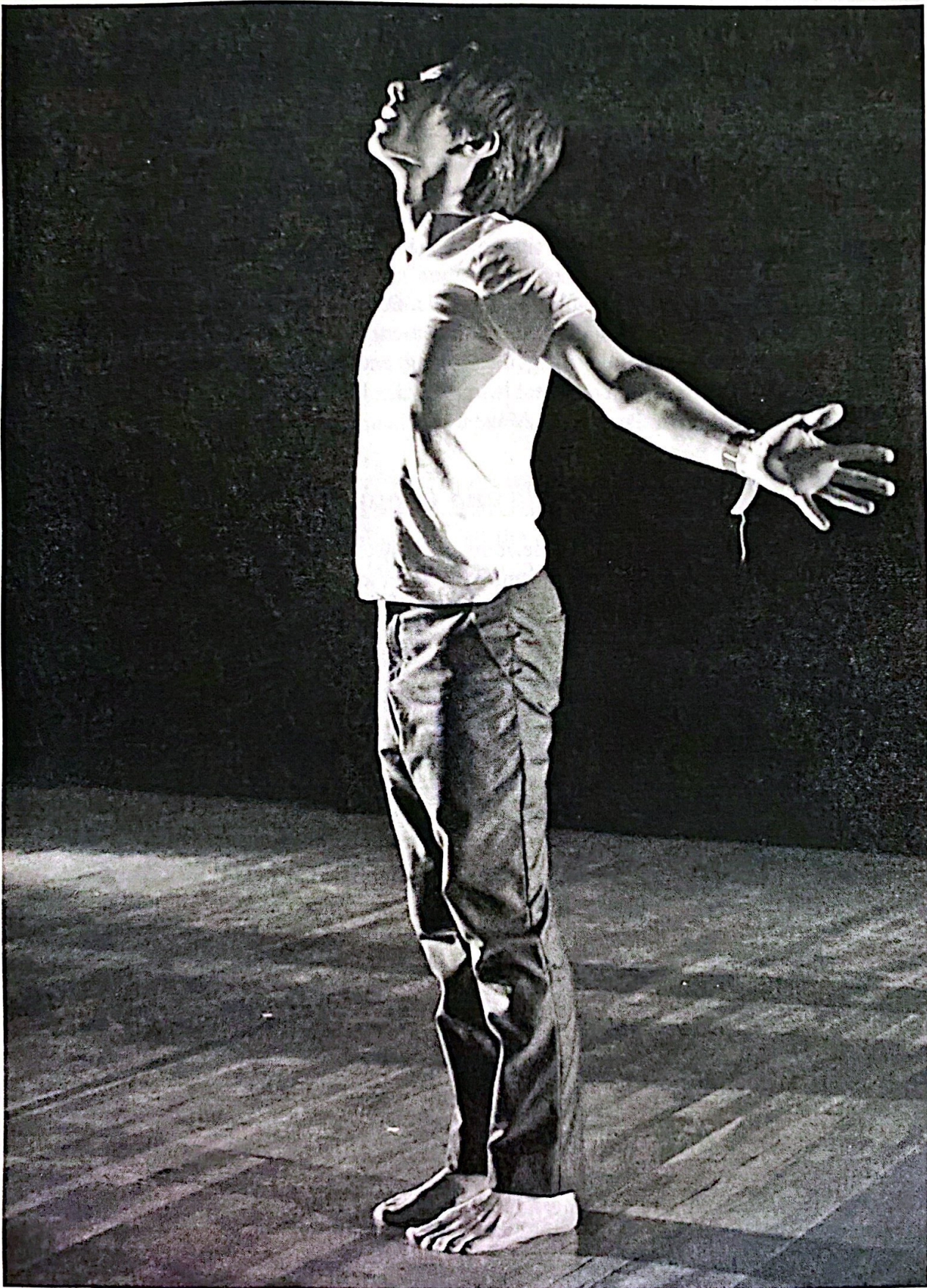
Thay, which means teacher, and is how Thich Nhat Hanh is known by his students, epitomized mindfulness in everyday life. His life, a model of engagement and integrated practice, includes but is not limited to sitting meditation. Thay's teaching centers around the "oneness of body and mind" and the use of the breath as a "harmonizer" of body and mind.<sup>2</sup>

In 2009, in my early thirties, I began studying dance and psychology at Naropa University. I brought with me to Naropa a wellspring of practice in Thay's integrative mindfulness framework. At Naropa, I was introduced to Contemplative Dance Practice (CDP), a form derived from many streams of somatics including Authentic Movement, avant-garde performance including influences from Judson Theater, Merce Cunningham, and John Cage, and meditation from Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche. These various streams were woven together by CDP founder, Barbara Dilley.<sup>3</sup>

CDP is a very intricate form of Dharma Practice and Deep Play. It combines sitting, and sometimes walking meditation, with two improvisatory sessions: "Personal Awareness Practice," undertaken solo, and "Open Space," where virtually anything goes. Each session of CDP ends with a short sit and an informal discussion.

After three years of studying and practicing this form with Dilley and esteemed teachers who learned CDP from her, I began to modify and adapt the practice for my





Brian Kimmel in Stina Hoberecht's *Awake in the Dark*, Naropa University, January 2014. Photograph by Dave Andrews.



own use as a meditation teacher and movement educator and facilitator. CDP in its prime form is practiced in about two-in-a-half hours. What I was really looking for was the elements of CDP, but in a condensed format that could be added on to other formal or informal practices.

When I first came to CDP I was obsessed with being “good.” My body learned through the ages that being good meant being quiet and still. What that looked like in my body was an extremely rigid spine while in a seated meditation posture and in everyday life. This rigid spine routinely immobilized me, and caused lower back pain and tension in my neck and shoulders to the point of injury, which in my current view was a form of self-harm. In its pursuit of being “good” my body forgot how to breathe. That’s when I gradually learned, through the form of CDP, how to live in my body again, how to move as my body moved, and in other movement forms, how to be with myself more fully, more authentically, and to be gentle, loving, and kind to myself. All of this is what led me to design a form more applicable to everyday life and formal meditation settings. I call this adapted form, Permissive Movement.

### *Permissive Movement: Solo and Group Forms*

Permissive Movement, I propose, is an easy way to incorporate movement and dance into any kind of Dharma practice. Permissive Movement is done both solo and in groups. It can be incorporated within regular sitting and walking periods or periods of chanting. The format I follow most often is sitting, walking, short sitting, Permissive Movement, and chanting, in that order. The time frame is up to you or whoever is facilitating. It depends mostly upon how much time there is allotted for movement if done as a part of a meditation group or other formal practice group. I find twenty minutes to be a good enough amount of time in more formal meditation settings. I also use a shortened version alternating sessions of Permissive Movement and sitting practice as a solo practice. Permissive Movement with the addition of sitting practice of any length could be an entire practice period. This is to say that Permissive Movement is a Dharma practice itself that can include a sitting period or just sitting as a form of Permissive Movement.

The following is an example of what might happen in a solo Permissive Movement session:

After sitting and walking meditation, I clear a space before my cushion for me to move. I bow to the space to acknowledge the sacredness of this moment, and to honor the practice I am about to begin. I see myself in the space standing. I see a particular posture of standing in a particular spot before me. Gently, I move to that place. I find the posture. I stand in just the right angle that feels right in my body. I saw myself with closed eyes, and so I close my eyes. I am not sure what happens from this place or this posture. I only saw myself standing still. And so I stand still. I stand just to stand. I stand and notice what it is like to stand. I encourage the breath in my body. I witness the breathing. I feel and I notice what it is like to stand and breathe.

After a few moments, my body begins to twist slightly to the right and left. I have twisted right and left in a similar way before. At first, I enjoy doing something familiar, but then I take a risk. I let go and allow my body to be moved—familiar or unfamiliar does not matter now. I want to be present for what happens now. I want to be present now. And so I follow the impulse, a sense in my body to continue. I experience the delight directly, as my body twists slightly. Then my right arm raises. I feel it raise. I notice what it is like for my arm to raise. I breathe with my arm raising. I follow the impulse, the sense in my body to continue. I raise my arm as far as it wants to raise and then lower my arm to the side of my body.



That's Permissive Movement. Just notice. Just allow being moved and being still. Nothing fancy or out-of-the-ordinary. You may want to notice when things seem like they stay the same. Notice when things seem to change.

In solo Permissive Movement practice you can do whatever you want. There is no one else in the room with you to dictate how long or short, how loud or quiet you are. You can just be. What is beneficial in groups, however, is the possibility of being witnessed, of seeing and being seen. I agree with Authentic Movement expert, Zoe Avstreich, who said, "To see and be seen is the intimacy of true presence which invites healing." In this way, both being witnessed and witnessing is an act of mindfulness.<sup>4</sup>

Witnessing as an act of mindfulness encourages a nonjudgmental attitude. This happens as nonjudgment of others and oneself. Seeing things as they are without judgment or pretext is a form of insight consistent with the aims of Buddhist practice, a form of waking up from the dream of delusion that radically shifts one into a new way of moving and being in the world. Witnessing and being witnessed can, in this way, influence the practice of Permissive Movement and affect impulses to move, thoughts, and perceptions of oneself and others.

Permissive Movement in groups adds to the transformative potential of movement in contemplative contexts. We are born as social creatures with social and cultural ways of moving, thinking, speaking, acting—and all the dos and don'ts. When we begin to move in mindfulness with others, we may begin to see and to feel how we have been moved as social and cultural beings. If parts of these social and cultural movements are not authentic, in Permissive Movement we can change, we can begin to move in a new way as individuals and as part of a group. That, to me, is liberation.

The following is an example of what a group Permissive Movement session might be like as recalled by a mover in the space:

I am mover in the space. The facilitator guides a few movements we do as a group, like raising the arms while breathing in and lowering the arms while breathing out. Raising the shoulders toward the ears on an inhalation, lowering the shoulders to neutral on an exhalation. Right after the facilitator mentions bringing the shoulders to neutral, the facilitator invites us to move as we wish to move. Maybe to begin with the shoulders, or not. I am drawn to close my eyes, so I close my eyes. The facilitator invites us to give ourselves permission to listen to our bodies, offering ourselves our undivided attention. I feel drawn to tears. I think to myself: "No one has ever allowed me to be myself. I am always told what to do. I depend upon it. Sometimes I feel like crying, but others tell me not to. That's okay, but right now with my eyes closed, I feel a sense of sadness in my chest." My attention is brought to the center of my chest. I move my left hand to my chest based upon an impulse inside of me. I feel the warmth of my hand and the coolness of my chest. I feel my sternum press outward against my palm on the inhalation and recede on the exhalation. My chest begins to warm. I feel my spine breathing and moving upon each exhalation and inhalation. I extenuate the movements of my spine. The sense of sadness in me turns to appreciation. The facilitator asks if there are any movements or gestures or postures we have yet to explore but would like to explore.

"Now is the moment," the facilitator says. "This is it." I open my eyes and look around the room. I want to see the other people in the space move. The facilitator then says, "Perhaps you see a movement you want to try on for yourself, and you begin to try on that movement. Pick up influence from others and put influence down."

That's what Permissive Movement might look like in groups. What might follow is the facilitator guiding towards playing, moving responsibly with others if called or continuing in personal practice. The only restriction in Permissive Movement is: Do No Harm. This means to not harm ourselves, others, or the space.



## *Differences and Similarities of Permissive Movement to Other Movement Forms*

In the description of solo Permissive Movement, the mover found delight in movement. This comes from CDP, to discover and follow “kinesthetic delight,” or joy in the body. Following impulse, however, comes more from Authentic Movement. In Permissive Movement, impulse can come from anywhere in the body, but stems from a feeling, a sensation, or an intuition in the mover. As in the Four Foundations of Mindfulness taught by the Buddha, mindfulness of the body, even the body while moving, helps to bring and keep the practitioner close to themselves and intimate with their direct experience.

CDP and Authentic Movement bring the mover to very different points than Permissive Movement. CDP depends more on a form. In Permissive Movement, the form is not so crucial, but the development of the mover’s sense of themselves and their relationship to others is. Authentic Movement comes from Depth Psychology and is usually practiced with one person as a witness, which helps develop a therapeutically relevant attachment bond to help the mover explore and integrate subconscious material through improvisatory exploration and active imagination.

The body in movement and stillness is very ordinary. What is perhaps unusual about movement and stillness as it is practiced in Permissive Movement is that it is done within a contemplative context, and in this is an explicit intention to follow impulse, to move or to be still as called from within. What begins to move is not a preconceived or vetted movement, but an authentic sense of moving as the body moves, a sense of being real, a sense of wholeness and “oneness of body and mind.”<sup>5</sup> Following impulse in this way with mindfulness, concentration, and insight is a Dharma door, a Dharma practice. It leads to fuller awareness of one’s experience, and a direct experience unencumbered by habitual thoughts, speech, and action. Whenever the body breaks out of its habitual patterns of doing, thinking, and acting, a new neural circuitry, or pathway of change, is created. That is the basis of Dharma, promoting a discovery of the elements of liberation in oneself, and going on that journey to benefit oneself and in the service of others.

## *Finding Permissive Movement as a Dharma Door*

I am compelled to find new disciplines, as in practices and forms like Permissive Movement, as Dharma doors that help elicit authenticity. This motivation is aligned with feminist Dharma theories. Boucher wrote: “At a woman-led retreat you may find yourself dancing in a circle, reaching to the sky, touching the ground ... many Buddhist institutions have become more sensitive to women’s particular needs.”<sup>6</sup> I argue that this is true not just with the needs of women but people of all genders and sexual orientations, including a newer generation of gender non-conformists, lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and transgender people, and people of numerous ethnic, social, and cultural makeups.

American Buddhism and 21st-century Dharma are adapting to our current world and its current social climates. Maybe one day Buddhist monastic orders will openly and unapologetically ordain transgender and gender-queer monastics, not to mention fully ordaining female monastics, as is the effort now in some sects. Our current world



demands new kinds of Dharma, new Dharma doors. I believe movement to be one of those doors.

## *Ways That Movement Is a Dharma Door*

In Somatic, or body-oriented psychology, I am particularly invested in the understanding that “movement is life.”<sup>7</sup> In fact, the body is always moving when it is alive. For some scholars and clinicians: “movement is the *modus operandi* of all life.”<sup>8</sup> One might see the very breath as a form of movement with the expansion and deflation of the lungs. No matter how subtle the breath becomes in meditation the autonomic function of the breathing mechanism propels movement, the pumping of the lungs as an organ, the contraction and expansion of the abdominal diaphragm and the ribs, and all the tiny muscles that move or engage for us to breathe. Another necessary movement is our beating heart. The surge of blood through the veins, and the various valves that open and close throughout the body providing life—sustaining oxygen and blood throughout the body and allowing the exiting of wastes and dead cellular material. All of this happens without the conscious effort of the meditation practitioner as you sit. Without even being aware of this, the body is taking care of itself. The body is moving to sustain itself and you. Awareness of this process engages the mind in the physical body, essentially bringing mind back to the body. That’s the meditation the Buddha proposed in his Sutra on the Full Awareness of Breathing (*Anapanasati*), and the Four Foundations of Mindfulness (*Satipatthana*). The awareness of the body in its organic movement internally and externally helps to establish intimacy with oneself. Concentration and insight develop through this natural inquiry into the process, the organic, life-sustaining movements of the body. That’s the effect and indication of mindfulness in the body, and is one practical use of Permissive Movement.

Additionally, awareness of movement and following impulses to move, like rolling the neck and shoulders in sitting meditation every once and a while or between sits, can help move stagnant energy. Because the mind is one with the body, when the body moves so does the mind. So if the mind is stuck, move the body. If emotions are stuck and one cannot experience the joy indicated by the Buddha in the Sutra on the Full Awareness of Breathing, move the body.

Thay has often taught not to discriminate between body and mind. One should smile just to smile, and if one does not feel joy, not to wait for joy to smile. Smile first, and joy will come. The smiling is the joy. Similarly, Thay describes joy or peace in the body while meditating as a form of liberation. When the body is not at peace, move in a way that brings peace. Sit in a way that brings peace.

Finally, in stark contrast to the body’s perpetual movement, practitioners often believe that sitting practice is the only practice Buddha recommended. However, the Buddha, in the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, mentioned four postures (sitting, standing, walking, and lying down) and many variations.<sup>9</sup> He also mentioned the practice of joy and breathing into the body. All of these indicate modern-day Dharma practices that allow for the discovery of mindfulness within all variations of sitting, walking, standing, and lying down. Permissive Movement and other movement forms within Dharma lineages offer methods to bring mindfulness to the body in all its various postures and movements. Dance and creative movement through space can become Dharma doors,



practiced for the purpose of peace, enjoyment, and liberation. This is the work I learned in CDP, and what I have brought to Permissive Movement.

## Conclusion

What I discovered in my own personal journey with Permissive Movement, as a facilitator and in solo and group practice, is a profound shift in my ability to confront myself without judgment. Permissive Movement has made my journey in the Dharma more intimate. Bearing Permissive Movement in mind, I now enter sitting meditation with more gentleness. I listen inside of myself for a posture that will support my well being. As I begin to sit on my meditation cushion, I breathe deeply. I listen for the posture to come organically from within. I am not looking at a photograph in my head, trying to make myself look like the Buddha in the picture. I am looking deeply into myself as a Buddha, listening for what the Buddha in me has to say. That Buddha is my internal witness, my internal guide, my mindfulness showing me the way.

I have taken pride in the many people who have come up to me after I have led group Permissive Movement during meditation retreats. They have talked to me about the transformation they felt and experienced in “moving as they felt called to move,” and how different and refreshing it is to be prompted in giving themselves permission to move just as they move. Then, when they returned to the cushion, they brought that permission with them—the permission to listen deeply to oneself, the permission to be oneself, that’s Permissive Movement.

I didn’t anticipate when I started my journey many years ago with yoga and Buddhism that I would create a form of practice, and that it would be oriented around movement. It gives me strength and courage to know I can make a difference in people’s lives through offering opportunities to move. Everyone moves. I hope to bring Permissive Movement to people who have forgotten that they can and do move, and that movement itself, if done with awareness and precision, can bring happiness and peace. I hope you will join me.

## NOTES

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