

Dancing Your Sacred Centres: Middle Eastern Dance, Movement Therapy and the Chakra System

Sally Denning

Abstract

This paper discusses the combined practice of Middle Eastern Dance, Movement Therapy and the Chakra System and their role in health, wellbeing and personal growth. The researcher draws upon experiences from her private movement therapy practice and research material from a Masters thesis that discusses the therapeutic benefits of Middle Eastern dance. It is anticipated that this paper will provide potential clients and dance movement therapists with research and case study information about a healthy and enjoyable practice to assist with health issues and provide insights into the physical and psychosocial impact of an ancient art form integrated with contemporary therapeutic practice.

Keywords: Middle Eastern Dance, dance movement therapy, chakra system

Introduction

Using a narrative style, this paper provides insight into the therapeutic benefits of Middle Eastern dance and how the eastern wisdom of the chakra system can be integrated with dance movement therapy as part of a therapeutic program.

Outcomes from a qualitative research thesis 'I just went to buy a felafel sandwich...' (Denning, 2001) are used to describe the psychosocial impact and perceived benefits of Middle Eastern dance. An ethnographic method was used in the thesis to highlight the way in which people make meaning including identity construction, sense of belonging and social engagement

through a dance form (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000). Findings from this thesis illustrate the impact of Middle Eastern dance on dancers' identity construction, physicality, emotional wellbeing and social engagement.

In addition, this paper explores case study data from the *Dancing Your Sacred Centres Program* which is used by the author in private practice. The program combines the ancient eastern system of the chakras, dance movement therapy and Middle Eastern dance, offering clients a unique health and wellbeing program. Case study methodology has been used to emphasise the intrinsic value of the case, while valuing the possibility of developing theoretical knowledge that can be transferred to other settings (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000).

'I just went to buy a felafel sandwich....'

Through my Masters thesis, I researched the lived experience of Middle Eastern dance of six Australian dancers. I undertook this project because of the profound positive impact Middle Eastern dance had on my personal development

Sally Denning B. Ed., GMD, Grad Cert DT, M.Ed., is a Professional Member of the DTAA. She currently works as a dance therapist in private practice, as a learning and development specialist and an arts educator. She is also undertaking a PhD at Melbourne University on the pedagogy underpinning dance movement therapy in Australia. sallydenning@optusnet.com.au

and physical wellbeing, and I was interested to see if those experiences were common with other dancers.

My interest in Middle Eastern dance began in the early 1980s, when I saw a performance by the beautiful dancer, Amira. She had long, dark glossy hair and a green glittery costume. I was mesmerised as she swayed her hips rhythmically and in perfect synchronicity with the tabla player, accompanied by the haunting sound of the oud. This occurred more than twenty years ago, yet remains etched in my memory - a starting point for my great love of this beautiful dance form. The attraction increases for me with the passing of time.

Middle Eastern dance is considered the oldest documented dance form, originating in India and carried by gypsies to Afghanistan and the Middle East. From there, the dance travelled to other countries including Spain, Iran, Turkey, Greece and Egypt (Buonaventura, 1983). Ancient statuettes depict female dancers with raised hips and upright stance, akin to positions of Middle Eastern dance. These have been found in countries as far apart as India and Spain. Some date back thousands of years before Christ (Buonaventura, 1983).

In my study (Denning, 2001), I used qualitative methods including in-depth interviews and movement observations of the participating dancers. In the interview process, each of the dancers was asked a range of semi-structured guided questions to explore their dance experience. Some of their responses are described below to highlight some of their perceived benefits of the Middle Eastern dance form.

Middle Eastern Dance, Self Esteem and Self Confidence

In response to a question regarding their experience of Middle Eastern dance, one

dancer replied that she believed Middle Eastern dance assisted to build her confidence and reinforce her natural feelings of being grounded and centred. *I am a grounded, centred, calm person naturally, but those principles have definitely been reinforced in me. I feel particularly in the past twelve months there's a greater sense of confidence...*

This relationship of the dance to building and reinforcing self confidence was also expressed by others interviewed. Another dancer commented: *... I think you actually gain confidence in some ways... I think too that you become more aware of your body...I think a lot of women don't have confidence in their body.*

Still another dancer commented: *I just feel I became a far more confident person through belly dancing. My self-esteem went up. I felt that I was good at something. I felt attractive which I think made a huge difference in how I felt about myself...*

Another common emotion expressed by most of the dancers interviewed was the feeling of happiness or joy in dance. One dancer expressed that she always feels happiness when she dances. Another responded to the question about how she feels when she dances with *happiness, always happiness*. A further dancer summarised her dance experience from the joy it brings her: *... the only time in my life when I ever feel truly happy is when I am dancing.*

Drawing upon the voice of the dancer, this qualitative study highlighted the relationship between the dance, confidence and happiness experienced by the dancers, and supports the use of Middle Eastern dance as an activity for others who may wish to improve their confidence, mood and self-esteem.

Middle Eastern dance, postural changes and improved physical condition

Each of the dancers indicated that their involvement in the dance had either increased their perception of a particular body part or changed their physical condition in some way.

One dancer identified that when she was dancing every Friday and Saturday she was extremely fit and toned. Her stomach became so toned and muscular that she was seriously concerned about becoming muscle bound!

Another commented that her posture and co-ordination had improved from dancing Middle Eastern style. Similarly, another dancer commented on the impact of the dance on her posture:

I have noticed differences in my head, where my head sits. I have noticed that my idea of what looking straight ahead is, has changed a lot. The focus of my eyes, where my eyes sit now and where my eyes look when they are looking ahead is totally different.

Additional comments indicated that the dance had improved overall body awareness:*You feel your body moving differently though space. Like you are actually more aware of different parts of you. I think when you are learning it, you start to realise that there are other parts of your body that you have control over. Later on you often feel your body moving quite differently. You feel more fluid in a way.* Another dancer indicated that through dancing she increased her overall body consciousness: *I am trying to think and increasingly develop the ability to hold a lot of my body in awareness, so it is*

partly that training of having an awareness of what everything is doing from my feet all the way up to my head and out to my arms.

Through body part awareness, we can become more aware of different aspects of ourselves. As identified by Whitehouse (1999), working with the body allows us to discover what we are like, because we are our movement. Through movement we can discover what parts of our bodies are not available, do not move and are not felt. It appears from the comments made by the dancers that Middle Eastern dance can offer a vehicle for knowing our body better, and assists in improving posture, mobility and physical condition.

Middle Eastern dance and social interaction

A key theme that emerged in many of the interviews was the social aspect of learning Middle Eastern dance. The social interaction between dancers and the friendships formed appeared to have played a strong role in the dancers' continuing involvement with the dance.

When asked why she maintained her interest in learning the dance, one dancer responded: *I really enjoyed the people I met there, it became very much a social thing for me.*

Similarly, another commented on the joy of learning with a group of other women and identified this as important in her enjoyment of the dance classes.

The classes I had been to were actually quite fun in that both teachers, (you and Jacqui), taught well and you were with a group of other women who were interested in exploring this type of movement

and music...You still felt self-conscious at times but you didn't feel so self conscious 'cause people were there to learn and to gain that experience.

Another dancer expressed the joy she felt in learning with others:

It was just a huge laugh. I can remember going to class and looking forward to them each week at the restaurant, because we would be dancing and giggling the whole hour, a lot of the time. With all women there we had a good laugh about that and the friends I suppose. We made friends. It was very social.

The dancers involved in the study all commented that learning Middle Eastern dance gave added value by offering an environment for building positive social interactions with others.

Many researchers equate dance and movement experiences with a positive or therapeutic outcome. Dance and movement specialists see dance as an important way to improve mobility and independence. Dance offers a sound approach to assisting problems of balance, coordination, rhythm, endurance, strength, self-expression and flexibility (Whitehouse, Adler and Chodorow, 1999).

This study indicates that Middle Eastern dance can contribute to physical and emotional wellbeing.

Movement observations of Middle Eastern dance using Laban Movement Analysis

The data from movement observations of the dancers provides support for the perceived benefits of the dance as reported by the dancers.

Laban Movement Analysis (LMA) was used to provide a detailed movement observation of each dancer. Videotapes aided the observation process. LMA allowed review of each dancer's style and consideration of the following points:

- where the body moves in space
- the shapes the body makes in space
- the dynamic qualities evident in the movement experience
- how the body initiates and executes an action.

Using LMA increased the accuracy of my work and reduced the limitations of single observer bias. This approach is supported by the work of social researcher Danny Jorgensen (1989) and when combined with interview data, a strong profile of the dancer as mover can be explored.

In his early writings Laban indicated that we can see 'in other people's movements what they feel and even how they think' (Kestenberg et al, 1999; p. 6). The use of LMA to do this is further supported by Irmgard Bartenieff (1980), who emphasised the vocabulary as a vital factor in assisting the observation process. And Bonnie Meekums (2002), tells us that the three main areas of observation in LMA are Body, Effort and Shape/Space.

A sample movement observation of one of the dancers, incorporating LMA, in vignette form follows.

The observations of this dancer highlight the range of Efforts and demonstrate emphasis of specific body parts in body awareness. The dance description emphasises clear movement in the Vertical and Horizontal planes. In the Vertical there is awareness of her head/tail connection and core between – with pelvic movements strongly accentuated. A spine that supports the Vertical plane while having the potential for fluid grace

The dancer

Barefooted, she wears a soft flowing ankle length skirt with a brightly coloured, beaded hip scarf tied low around her hips and equally colourful matching spangled and beaded top. She arrives on stage facing the audience but moving sideways. Her hips move percussively to the music, holding time with the drummer. She dances mainly on the balls of her feet and her arms are low, swinging easily from the elbows. Every now and then she frames a particular movement with her arms but mostly her arms are held low and to her sides.

The dancer's movement style shows mostly direct movements in space. Indirectness occurs when she changes dynamics to a more serpentine approach and her arms move within the horizontal plane like a pair of writhing snakes.

The dancer moves sideways to centre stage, and continues from this central point with side-to-side movements. She moves predominantly in the horizontal plane with her movements expanding sideways and across her body in response to the environment.

Her breath causes inflation and deflation of the trunk, with a pattern of Growing and Shrinking evident, particularly Widening and Narrowing, supportive of her Spreading and

Enclosing as in Shaping in Space in the Horizontal Plane. The dancer demonstrates Free Flow in her dance. It seems her energy flows through and out beyond the body boundary. Her movements are both fluid and carefree.



Photo: Sally Denning

Generally, her Flow is even, but on occasions in accordance with the rhythmic intensity of the drummer, her dance is punctuated by bursts of high intensity Free Flow. Her movements are Light and buoyant and she seems to fly through her dance.

Effort combinations of Weight and Flow are emphasised. In Laban terms these dominant qualities give the dancer's movements a dream-like state. The effect of the dance is mesmerising and timeless, characterised by Spell Drive; Space, Flow and Weight are in concentration.

She holds the crown of her head high, as if pulled up in the Vertical, a string attached, her crown lifted upwards. Every now and then she glances down at her hips as if mentally urging them to move faster. Her dance is very free and full of spirit.

with flexibility, suggests a body attitude of 'proud to be human and comfortable attending to the world' (Hackney, 2002, p. 85). Within this description of the Vertical, there is an affinity for Weight Effort, where the self is emphasised. This body attitude is conducive to assertion, confidence and taking a firm stand (Kestenberg et al, 1999).

The other strong emphasis in the description is that of the Horizontal

Plane. Enclosing and Spreading Shaping movements that occur in this Plane, according to Bernstein (1981), are associated with the ability to explore the shape of possibilities within a given situation. They are related to notions of 'give and take' and reciprocal communication (Kestenberg et al, 1999, p. 166). Also, conducive to encouraging social interaction, with Spreading encouraging communication as in giving

out, meeting someone, and Enclosing - bringing what's out there back and in.

Overall, support can be found in the LMA observations for the dancers' narrative reporting of perceived changes in self esteem and confidence, postural and physical condition and social interaction.

Combined practice program – *Dancing Your Sacred Centres*

Within my movement therapy practice, I offer a program titled *Dancing Your Sacred Centres*. This program draws upon Middle Eastern dance, the chakras and dance movement therapy. Some thoughts on the chakra system and this combined practice program are presented for consideration by other therapists who may be interested in using this approach.

The Chakra system

The chakras are part of traditional yoga philosophy. They are subtle force centres that vitalize and control the physical body. The term chakra is a Sanskrit word which means 'wheel', indicating that these force centres are wheels of energy (Lansdowne, 1986).

The earliest mention of the chakra system is in the Vedas ('knowledges'), a series of hymns that are the oldest written tradition of India. These writings were created from an even older oral tradition of the Aryan culture believed to have been an invading Indo-European tribe that swept into India during the second millennium B.C. (Judith, 2002).

The chakras regulate an exchange of energy in the body and record the reason for the change. In this way each chakra becomes like a data bank, storing information about the nature and type of energy shift (McNamara, 2002).

Although the chakra system is commonly attributed to the Indian Vedas, a similar process is also acknowledged within the ancient Egyptian System of the Five Bodies. In the Egyptian System, the chakras exist as seven energy centres and are described as interactive, with each of the five bodies having a purpose and function of its own. It is believed that growth and development of humans is achieved by working through the five bodies of Aufu (physical body/earth), Ka (air body/conscious mind), Haidit (water body/unconscious mind), Khu (fire body/collective unconscious) and Sahu (diamond body), and the full integration of all five bodies (McNamara, 2002).

In the Egyptian system, the chakras reside within the physical body (Aufu). In turn, the information from the chakras influences every organ and tissue of the physical body via a network of subtle energy circuits or meridians. The condition of the physical body thus affects and is affected by the other five bodies. What we eat, how we move, the environment we are exposed to and even what we wear or how we adorn the physical body can impact the chakra glandular centres through the meridian channels. In the Egyptian system, the purpose of the physical body is to support, serve and reflect the other less tangible bodies (McNamara, 2002).

The program's approach

The developmental movements used in working with the chakras allow clients to explore different movements and their bodily sensation. Overall, through use of this framework, clients can begin to expand their movement range.

For example: Starting with Chakra One, which in Sanskrit is called *Muladhara*, we work with the base of the spine and the use of legs and feet. Particular

emphasis is given to the use of Bartenieff Fundamentals, specifically the 'heel rock', as this assists clients to explore connections between the heel and the pelvis. The Fundamentals also assist to increase understanding of bodily based connections, as well as the connection between the two main muscles regulating flexion and extensions - the iliopsoas in flexion from the groin and the hamstrings in extension from the sit bones, the ischium. Tension can be stored in the groin muscle and through increased understanding of body based connection, tension may be released, energy unlocked and more fluid motion obtained (Bartenieff, 1990).

The element inherent in Chakra One is 'earth'. In Middle Eastern dance the feet and legs are often the powerhouse behind the movements. A good strong connection with these areas of the body can bring an earthiness and grounded quality to the dance.

The central issue related to Chakra One is survival (Judith, 1996). Raising this issue as a session focus offers participants the opportunity to reflect upon 'survival' and consider their embodied experience of it. The instinct to survive is fundamental to humans and is at the core of our very physical existence. The flight or fight function is deeply related to this area. When people feel threatened, all available energy is directed to survival and little is available for anything else (Judith, 1996). Exploring this element from a movement therapy perspective allows clients to experience the bodily based feeling of readiness for flight or fight versus a relaxation state. This work can assist clients to sense where they might be holding tension in their body or have a held bodily based sensation from an old experience. According to Judith (1996), by reclaiming Chakra One, we can live a more

balanced life in relation to our basic survival instincts rather than being unconsciously ruled by them (1996).

Following a thorough exploration of the connection between the heel and pelvis, Chakra Two is introduced. This is primarily associated with the pelvic region (an area that is strongly emphasised in Middle Eastern dance). Again, according to Judith (1996), *sensations, emotions, movement and sexuality* are central to Chakra Two. Graceful movements can be an indicator of a balanced Chakra Two, whereas rigidity of body and attitudes can be an indicator of a deficiency in this area. Chakra Two offers opportunities to explore sexuality, boundaries, pleasure and stored body based feelings relating to emotional trauma (Judith, 1996). Middle Eastern dance provides a rich source of movement sequences that can aid discussion of embodied feelings in the pelvic area of the body together with opportunities for movement based sequences to balance the second chakra.

Dancing Your Sacred Centres program works through each of the chakras in turn, combining a range of Middle Eastern dance and movement therapy techniques. This triangulation of movement experience offers clients therapy that is attractive, fun and contributes to improved health and wellbeing.

Dance movement therapy - or not?

The combined use of Middle Eastern dance, movement therapy and chakra system assists individuals to experience revelatory emotional responses - sometimes reliving or re-experiencing a past emotional event (McNamara, 2002). Dance movement therapy assists the individual to move through this event, subsequently releasing the negative memory stored in the chakra/ data bank.

There can be overlap between the content of a dance movement therapy session and a dance class. Current literature is clear about the distinguishing factors, but in practice it can be quite difficult to know when that line has been crossed.

Stanton-Jones (1992) clearly delineates dance movement therapy from other types of body–mind therapies such as yoga, tai-chi, aerobics, massage, chiropractics and Rolfling by asking three key questions;

- what is the overall aim of the endeavour?
- what is the underlying theoretical basis of the work?
- what type of movement is being employed?

According to Stanton-Jones, through the identification of the answer to these questions, the aim of the endeavour can be determined. Movement that is aimed at expression or achievement of an aesthetic idea may be considered ‘an expressive art form, whereas movement that is aimed at improving the individual’s ability to do a particular activity may have a focus on rehabilitation or centre on improving a level or standard of performance – the psychological feeling of wellbeing a possible secondary benefit’ (Stanton-Jones, 1992, pp 4-5).

Dancing Your Sacred Centres is clearly advertised as movement therapy, distinguishing it from a traditional Middle Eastern dance class, because of its focus, intent, client and outcomes. People attend as clients rather than students and some recent clients include:

- people experiencing depression
- women who have experienced sexual abuse
- people who suffer from severe breathing issues
- people with multiple sclerosis

- those who are recovering from cancer
- teenagers wishing to discover more about themselves and their bodies
- women who would like to lose weight and/or improve their physical mobility
- mothers of children with disabilities
- health practitioners wishing to expand their therapeutic tool kit

In defining dance movement therapy, Daria Halprin explains that the body, through its primary language of movement, is used as an expression of our being. Dance movement therapy assists us to access deeply embodied feelings and memories. The way we move can reveal disabling or impaired movement patterns. Halprin suggests whatever emotions reside in our body, for instance joy, despair, anger or confusion will rise to consciousness when we express ourselves through movement (Halprin, 2002). Inevitably some movements trigger an emotional response from some participants in the session.

According to Helene Lefco, dance movement therapy is an art and a skill that relies on our basic urge to dance; it enhances the important fusion of mind and body and promotes integration necessary for psychic and physical well-being (Lefco, 1974).

Dancing Your Sacred Centres draws upon our basic urge to dance and uses a range of movement techniques to work with both mind and body. The program is customised for client goals and particular participant requirements. Emotions that are triggered from the dance experience are acknowledged and discussed. Clients are encouraged to journal their movement experiences and record changes experienced in their physical and emotional states.

Dance movement therapy is built upon the 'therapeutic' elements in dance in order to create a practice of therapy. The *Dancing Your Sacred Centres* program draws upon the therapeutic elements in dance together with the additional Eastern wisdom from Middle Eastern movements and the chakra system.

Using primarily non-verbal therapy and symbolic representation, dance movement therapy assists the client to develop ways of defending against anxiety or emotional pain (Stanton-Jones, 1992). In the *Dancing Your Sacred Centres* program it seems that the interest of clients in exploring dance and movement comes first, while the emotional release and underlying issues are revealed much later. This may be after trust is built and a therapeutic relationship has been established.

Perhaps it is the quality of trust between therapist and client, together with the aim of the program that distinguishes movement therapy from a traditional dance class. Either way, I am intrigued by the fine line that distinguishes therapeutic dance from that of 'dance movement therapy' and have chosen to further investigate this question as part of research to illuminate current practice of dance movement therapists in Australia.

Conclusion

This paper has drawn upon data from a qualitative research thesis together with private practice case study material to provide insight into the therapeutic benefits of Middle Eastern dance. It further illustrates how the Eastern wisdom of the chakra system can be used when integrated with dance movement therapy, as part of a therapeutic program.

It is anticipated that some of the ideas and techniques outlined in this paper, together with the perceived impact, as described

through the voice of the dancer, may be of interest to other dance movement therapists wishing to explore additional therapeutic movement techniques in their practice.

Discussions on dance movement therapy versus therapeutic movement will continue to occur and inform professional reflections on Australian dance movement therapy practice. In the meantime, in a society where we are concerned about increased obesity, depression and other health issues, this paper aims to offer insights into the physical and psychosocial impact of an ancient healing practice, a creative art therapy and a modern day popular dance form.

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