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Moving Through, Moving On: Examining the Life Well Lived Through the Lense of Impermanence

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Abstract

This thesis explores the themes from *Walking Each Other Home*, the work I choreographed as part of my graduation requirements in the Alonzo King Lines BFA Program at Dominican University. I begin by making the case for the academic discussion of dance, including barriers to the development of the field and my place in it. Asserting that dance is a subject of religious merit, I place my piece within a broader context of dance pieces that deal with topic and themes of myth and spiritual truth. I then give a brief overview of Buddhism, centering around the Four Noble Truths and their connection to love as it is defined in Buddhism; loving-kindness, compassion, joy, and inclusiveness. From there I discuss the process and production of my piece, *Walking Each Other Home*, which has its roots in Buddhist thought and understanding. Reflecting on the process, I relate the construction of the piece to Buddhist principles, and see where I upheld and deviated from them. Unfolding from the original question of “what makes life worth living?”, I rehash the journey that I took throughout the creation of the piece, ultimately realizing that the way I constructed my piece didn’t reflect the truths I was trying to describe, and resolving to learn from the experience as an example of Buddhist praxis. It is my hope that this thesis will encourage the further development of dance as an academic area of study, provide a context with which to place the development I have undergone throughout my college career, and serve as a reminder that the proper response to the suffering inherent in our world is compassionate, loving understanding.

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Moving Through, Moving On: Examining the Life Well Lived Through the Lense of
Impermanence

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ABSTRACT: This thesis explores the themes from *Walking Each Other Home*, the work I choreographed as part of my graduation requirements in the Alonzo King Lines BFA Program at Dominican University. I begin by making the case for the academic discussion of dance, including barriers to the development of the field and my place in it. Asserting that dance is a subject of religious merit, I place my piece within a broader context of dance pieces that deal with topic and themes of myth and spiritual truth. I then give a brief overview of Buddhism, centering around the Four Noble Truths and their connection to love as it is defined in Buddhism; loving-kindness, compassion, joy, and inclusiveness. From there I discuss the process and production of my piece, *Walking Each Other Home*, which has its roots in Buddhist thought and understanding. Reflecting on the process, I relate the construction of the piece to Buddhist principles, and see where I upheld and deviated from them. Unfolding from the original question of “what makes life worth living?”, I rehash the journey that I took throughout the creation of the piece, ultimately realizing that the way I constructed my piece didn't reflect the truths I was trying to describe, and resolving to learn from the experience as an example of Buddhist praxis. It is my hope that this thesis will encourage the further development of dance as an academic area of study, provide a context with which to place the development I have undergone throughout my college career, and serve as a reminder that the proper response to the suffering inherent in our world is compassionate, loving understanding.

My thesis comes about at the confluence of many factors in my life, and centers around my academic experiences in my studies at Dominican University, namely the creation of a dance piece as part of my graduation requirements. While I developed the piece over the course of my senior year, the ideas I tried to express have been germinating for years. My study of dance has thrust me into a world where driven, passionate people attempt to stretch the boundaries of the possible and pursue excellence in their field. I have seen my classmates, teachers, and members of the wider community overcome every obstacle to share what they love. In my broader life, too, I have seen the lengths that people are able to go, and the suffering they will endure, in order to attempt or accomplish their heart's desires. It seems to me that love, and the continual focus on it in the face of life's trials, has a transcendent quality, enabling us to surpass our estimations of what we are capable of, and provide a benefit to the world that goes beyond transactional give and take.

The embrace of love as a way to rise above the trials of life is a practice that is found at the heart of Buddhism, a philosophy and religious tradition that has been a companion to me throughout my college experience. The Buddha stressed the centrality of love as the core of an enlightened worldview, with each of the four aspects of love forming a cornerstone of noble living. Buddhism calls for humanity to embrace the suffering that comes along with existence, using love as a way to transmute that suffering into healing and transformation. *Walking Each Other Home (WEOH)* was my attempt at expressing the idea of embracing suffering with love, and my way of engaging in the praxis of Buddhist ideas within dance, using my art as context for my continual exploration of these philosophies. In that exploration I found that many of the ups and downs of the process of making my piece could be explained in Buddhist frameworks, and have used this thesis as a way to reflect on the larger themes at work in my fleeting process.

This thesis is an exploration of the foundations of the life well lived, as well as the eternal truths that I believe enable us to reach beyond the realm of the human and into the universal. Drawing on Buddhist Dharma and the discussions and process that occurred during the construction of my piece, I will attempt to make the case for a generous giving of life and love in the face of impermanence and suffering. Working within the context of Buddhist philosophy, although suffering and bad fortune is inevitable, the gift of conscious discernment allows humanity to confront suffering and use it to create a better world. It should be stated that there are no hard conclusions to be found in this paper about the right way to create a dance piece, the true nature of human existence, or the supremacy of Buddhist thinking. This thesis can instead be a representation of a lived process of engagement with big questions, as opposed to a finished product of inquiry. Art is a means of engaging with the nature of reality and reflecting deep lessons about questions that other human endeavors fail to entirely grasp. For my dancers, myself, and hopefully the audience, *WEOH* was a reflection of reaching more fully into the nature of human life.

Before investigating dance through the lense of philosophy and religion, it is essential to make the case for the validity of the academic analysis of dance construction. Dance academia has been underdeveloped compared to other art forms, in part because of the difficulty in documenting and preserving primary sources: namely, the ethereal dances themselves (Young 3). The rise of video documentation has helped to preserve culturally significant dances for the next generations of dancers and audiences, but prior to that development the only form of documentation of dance resided in esoteric and complex notation forms like Feuillet notation and Labanotation; that is, of course, apart from the living, embodied preservation of dances through choreographers and those who restaged their works. Since dance has been mainly preserved and expounded upon by direct transmission from one generation of dancers to the

next, dance study has historically resided almost entirely in the studio. This creates a perception among dancers and dance teachers alike that learning about dance history is secondary to the actual practice of dancing (Young 3-4).

The devaluing of the academic study of dance creates a self-perpetuating cycle of devaluation that prevents serious development of dance education. The view of dance academia as lesser than other academic studies of art, like musical notation or art history, has led to a lack of trained, articulate teachers of dance history. While schools may try to compensate by using amateur dance historians or untrained dancers as teachers, the field as a whole still suffers from a lack of adequately trained members. This in turn creates the perception that dance is a field that is not worthy of serious academic discourse. That perception leads to a lack of importance placed on collecting primary sources for academic discussion in the first place. While there are significant challenges to the collection of academic materials because of the public and internal perception of dance, the difficulty in preserving primary sources for later study lies not only in the difficulties of notating or properly recording works, but in the dissemination of those primary sources. The guarded nature of choreography, seen as intellectual property and therefore subject to being plagiarized, creates an environment that stifles the access of those interested in dance history to a wide range of works from disparate techniques and time periods (Young 6). All of these factors reinforce each other, suppressing the development of dance as an academic pursuit. Tricia Henry Young succinctly describes the issue at hand, saying:

“In the case of dance [...] lack of value of dance leads to lack of documentation and collection of primary sources and lack of interest in accessing what does exist, leads to diminished potential and incentive for creation of history curricula and a body of literature

in the field, leads to reinforcement of devaluation of dance, leads to continued lack of capacity and access to sources, and so on.” (2)

In writing this thesis, I felt hamstrung by the lack of examples of dance literature that were presented to me throughout my education as a dancer. While this paper is a required part of my education through Dominican University, I found in it a new appreciation for the importance of writing about dance as a means for communicating the messages within dance works, as well as a means for talking about how dance practices can be interpreted and displayed to a wider audience.

I pair philosophy, religion, and dance together because I believe that the proper context to place discussions of dance-making and dancing are the religious and philosophical. This is not the norm, but I follow in a long line of dancers and choreographers who chose to explore the deepest intuitions of humanity and the divine in their works through both form and subject matter. Choreographers like August Bournonville, Martha Graham, and Alvin Ailey used their vocation to produce works that addressed both mythology and spiritual truths. Martha Graham produced a suite of works that drew from Greek mythology to dive into the depths of human emotion (Benjamin 2013). Alvin Ailey's *Revelations* explores Christianity and the spirit of the Baptist religion as it was presented to him growing up in rural Texas in the early 20th century (*Revelations AA*). August Bournonville wrapped religion and dance up together entirely, choosing to use dance as his expression of piety (Jurgenson). These choreographers, and the works they produced, should be viewed as original and nuanced entries into the conversation of religion and philosophy. Yet, because this research and exploration is situated in the physical body, they are not widely discussed outside of dance circles.

While the cultural perception of dance, in academia and otherwise, is partially to blame for this error of omission, so too is our inability to look past text for definitive accounts and

wisdom in the realm of religion and philosophy. While the written word is an invaluable tool for reflection and discovery, it is imperative to recognize other forms of experiential learning. Dance, or bodily movement or becoming, is one such form. As Lawrence Sullivan states in his seminal work, "Seeking an End to the Primary Text", "[A] non textual basis for reflecting on the human spirit's engagement with the world is the image of the body itself" (56). The viewing of dance is a way for an audience to engage with the world through the presentation and manipulation of the body on the part of a skilled conduit. Furthermore, the practice of dance is a direct engagement with ideas on a level of understanding that incorporates but ultimately surpasses the thinking mind. What better way to grapple with the inherent dichotomy of religion, that split between mystical experience and abstract understanding? Sullivan lifts up alternatives to text in order to highlight the world outside the boundaries of intellectual, text-based understanding. Speaking of the limits of text, he says "we must probe the meaning of the fact that the religious conditions of humanity lie largely beyond sacralty of scripture" (44-45). Dance, throughout time and across its many variations in form, has served as a vehicle for artists and religious practitioners to probe for answers to the deepest questions of human experience and our relationship to the eternal. For those who practice it and for those who view it, dance can be a religious experience.

This thesis is an attempt at marrying the experiential and the abstract, blending the written word with an embodied praxis. Writing about my experience is invaluable to me, and serves as a way of preserving my work while advocating for more depth of academic study in dance. That said, neither aspect of this communication will ever be complete. Dance, in all its ability to give an experience, cannot draw on words and common understanding of those words to make a succinct point. Yet, in leaning on text in order to communicate the essence of my work, the actual experience of viewing the work is lost, irreparably impairing the ability to

communicate the dance on its terms and in its original language. Sullivan describes this quandary of stuffing experience into text: "Lost in [text] is the struggle of the human imagination with the chaos inherent in the matter of speech (breath, muscles, organs, bones). The force of imagination organizes the corporeal mass of the body into cultural orders that reflect those imaginative efforts and processes" (46-47). While there are many reasons why dance scholarship is lacking, perhaps the most universal issue is that there is nothing that can replace the experience of being in the theater, watching a piece unfold.

Buddhism, Suffering, and Love

Though my exploration of Buddhist thought began four or five years ago, the history of Buddhism stretches back more than 2600 years to the birth of Siddhartha Gautama, the historical Buddha. A prince and member of the nobility, he was sheltered from the harsh realities of human suffering by his father, who kept him enclosed in luxury to prevent him from ever learning the truth. One day, when he was 29 years old, he rode in a carriage outside the walls of his palace, and was confronted with a sick person, an old man, and a corpse lying in the road. Shaken by viewing disease, aging, and death, he was comforted by seeing a wandering holy man, who represented the path of seeking enlightenment (O'Brien 2018). He renounced his title and luxuries, left his family, and went in search of the answer to the suffering inherent to being alive. Seeking purity of mind and body, he adopted extreme ascetic practices, believing that self-denial would bring wisdom. He also sought out teachers who would impart their wisdom, but none were able to bring Siddhartha peace. After six years, he had reached his wit's end, and sat himself down at the roots of a bodhi tree, resolved not to move until he had reached enlightenment. Accounts vary, but after a day and night, or three, of confronting the depths of his doubt and the tricks of Mara, a representation of sensory pleasure and the illusory nature of

the world, he attained enlightenment. He stayed meditating under the bodhi tree for another 49 days, basking in the peace and awareness of true reality that he had attained. After determining that he could not rightfully ascend to Nirvana, transcending life and death, without clearing a path for all others to attain enlightenment, he arose and began wandering the land, teaching the Dharma, or ultimate truth, to all those he encountered.

The basis of the Dharma is found within the Four Noble Truths, which form the original insight that propelled Siddhartha on his journey to becoming the Buddha. Those four truths are:

1. All That all forms of being, human and otherwise, are afflicted with suffering.
2. That the cause of this suffering is Craving, born of the illusion of a soul.
3. That this suffering has a lasting end in the Experience of Enlightenment (Nibbana) which is the complete letting go of the illusion of soul and all consequent desire and aversion.
4. That this peaceful and blissful Enlightenment is achieved through a gradual training, a Path that is called the Middle Way or the Eightfold Path (Buddhism for Beginners).

These truths, simple yet profound, form the basis of the Buddhist tradition. The Buddha's prescription for suffering lies in the Eightfold Path, a mode of living that emphasizes proper conduct, unhindered by excess or unnecessary restraint. In combination with and encompassing meditation and the cultivation of wisdom, the Eightfold Path promises freedom from suffering and the cycle of death and rebirth that all living beings are subject to. The Buddha taught that suffering is threefold. It is created out of the realities of life which the Buddha witnessed on his first excursion outside his palace: pain, aging, and death. It is born of desire, which develops in an attempt to circumvent the realities of our impermanent existence. And it is born out of the lack of attainment of enlightenment, which prevents truly lasting contentment, since humanity is still at the mercy of conditioned experience without that attainment (BBC 2). The Buddha taught that the achievement of enlightenment could be attained by anyone, within

the confines of a lifetime. As recorded in the *Dhammapada*, one of the central texts of the Pali canon, which forms the basis for Theravada Buddhism: "Those whose minds have reached full excellence in the factors of enlightenment, who, having renounced acquisitiveness, rejoice in not clinging to things — rid of cankers, glowing with wisdom, they have attained Nibbana [Nirvana, Sanskrit] in this very life" (Verse 89). This radical notion that freedom from suffering was attainable to everyone resulted in the adoption and development of Buddhist practices across many different regions, peoples, and time periods. The unifying factor was the same: those who were suffering sought the truth behind and the end of suffering, much like Siddhartha did.

The philosophical bedrock of both Buddhism lies in the concept of impermanence. This has two facets, the impermanence of the external world, and the impermanence of the internal being. The Buddhist view on the impermanence of the external world can be summed up succinctly with this line from the Upatissa-Pasine, a section of the Mahavagga, which describes the Buddha's journey after his enlightenment and the spread of his message. One of his first disciples, Venerable Assaji, is heading into town to collect alms, and is confronted by a wanderer, who, noting his obvious enlightened state, asked "what is your teacher's teaching? What does he proclaim?" The conversation went as follows:

I am new, my friend, not long gone forth, only recently come to this Dhamma [Dharma, Sanskrit] & Discipline. I cannot explain the Dhamma in detail, but I will tell you the gist in brief.

[...]

Whatever phenomena arise from cause:

their cause

& their cessation.

Such is the teaching of the [Buddha],
the Great Contemplative.

Then to Sariputta the wanderer, as he heard this Dhamma exposition, there arose the dustless, stainless Dhamma eye: 'Whatever is subject to origination is all subject to cessation.'

Even if just this is the Dhamma,
you have penetrated
to the Sorrowless (asoka) State
unseen, overlooked (by us)
for many myriads of aeons.

As can clearly be seen, the external world is not a permanent creation in Buddhist thought, but rather a series of causes, effects, and cessations occurring simultaneously in an ever-changing mix. This is so central to the points Buddhism attempts to communicate that it is said that just this teaching, if properly understood, could bring enlightenment. And in fact it does, as Sariputta the Wanderer has the "stainless Dhamma eye" awakened within him.

As humans, we tend to think of humankind as exceptional in some sense, separate and different from the rest of the life on Earth and in the cosmos. Buddhism directly contradicts that sense, asserting that we are just as in flux and subject to impermanence as the rest of the universe. Aging, illness, chaos and death undermine the human condition, rendering it subject to decay over time. The universe as a whole is subject to entropy, constantly confounding any attempt at local order. Impermanence impacts our physical bodies, but it also exerts its pull on our minds and spiritual being. Buddhism teaches that there is no essential "soul," since our identities and mental characteristics are just as subject to change as our physical bodies. The fixation on the possession of a soul is just another iteration of Mara, or illusion. The Buddha is

very direct with his diagnosis of the decaying quality of body, mind, and soul: “Behold this body — a painted image, a mass of heaped up sores, infirm, full of hankering — of which nothing is lasting or stable!” (Dhammapada verse 147). Still, humans attempt to create a form of stability and order amidst the chaos, chasing permanence in an fleeting existence. These attempts at permanence are a result of humanity living under the spell of illusion, the very spell that the Buddha was able to break, resulting in his enlightenment. Those who are under the spell of illusion in any form are destined to suffer, since clinging to illusory notions of the world like the permanence of life or worldly pleasure will inherently produce suffering when those notions are proven incorrect. The Buddha taught that it is possible to escape the suffering that is associated with the attachment to illusory beliefs about the nature of the world through the realization of the Dhamma. Through the process of awakening to the truth of reality, humankind is able to connect to the eternal, timeless truths of the universe through perfect awareness of the present moment, freeing themselves from the influence of delusion, and the cycle of Samsara, the death and rebirth associated with the material world.

Although the Buddha was freed from the cycle of Samsara upon his enlightenment, he chose to eschew ascension to Nirvana in order to help the rest of humanity free themselves. Wandering in a world of lost beings, he was forced to confront those who were suffering time and time again in an attempt to free them from their bonds. His confrontation of the ignorant, the foolish, and the deluded was executed through love and compassion. As Thich Nhat Hanh describes in his book, *Teachings on Love*, “Love, compassion, joy, and equanimity are the very nature of an enlightened person.” (Hanh 4). The four aspects of love in Buddhism, as described by Hanh, reveal the specific pathways that humans can employ to repair the world through love. Each quality flows into the other, and informs a mature, selfless love that is capable of healing the world’s many ills and helping along the enlightenment of others. The first is *Metta*, known

commonly as “loving-kindness.” This is the capacity to love, and the pure intention to love the object of affection, free from self-serving forms of attachment. This is an intentional practice that matured as a result of meditative contemplation and lived effort. The process of cultivating loving-kindness begins with feeling a sense of unconditional love for those with whom you already feel a close bond with, but eventually cultivating that love and extending it to strangers, or even those who have wronged you.

The second is *Karuna*, or compassion. Compassion arises from the recognition of suffering in another, allowing the practitioner to be present with that suffering in the hopes of lessening it. It is important to note that this does not involve taking on the suffering as one's own, but rather bolstering the sufferer against the tide of their pain with listening, understanding, and helpful words or actions. Compassion is both an internal and external practice. Internally the practitioner focuses on compassionate thoughts, as they naturally flow into the external practice of compassionate words and actions. Grounded in the strength of the Dhamma, the practitioner is able to confront and help bear suffering without suffering themselves, contributing to the cessation of suffering for all humanity.

The third is *Mudita*, or joy. Joy is the quality of finding happiness in the present moment, such that you are able to experience fully the miracles hiding in plain sight. Joy connects to wellbeing and the awareness of that wellbeing. The ability to find pleasure in the working condition of your body, the green of the trees, or the delight in a child's smile are all forms of joy. The discerning factor is the focus on the here and now, and the transformation of the mundane into a site for love. Developing Joy allows one to draw more readily from the well of love and pleasure that continually surrounds their daily lives.

The fourth and final dimension of love is *Upeksha*, or equanimity. This is the ability to be impartial in love, sharing it without being attached to whom you share it with. A good example is

that of parents, who must be able to love their children equally and settle disputes between them, without showing favoritism or disproportionate punishment. *Upeksha* can also be translated as inclusiveness, for it is the quality of love that allows for love to be shared across the entirety of all living beings. Developing inclusiveness in love transcends the boundaries of self, attachment, and circumstance, allowing the practitioner to share that love to the widest degree possible. In that way the practitioner does not discriminate against others for their external qualities, seeing each and every living thing as worthy of love because of the shared condition of aliveness within them.

Loving-kindness, compassion, joy, and inclusiveness are all essential aspects of love, and no love is complete unless all four aspects are present. Harnessing the four qualities of love, the Buddhist practitioner is able to help bear the suffering of the world with tenderness and care, lessening the burden for others. As much as the differing qualities flow into each other, the realization of the Dharma and the attainment of enlightenment naturally flows into love for every living being, in all its dimensions. The Buddha called directly for this love in the “Discourse on Loving-Kindness”, the Karaniya Metta Sutta: “Let him radiate boundless love towards the entire world — above, below, and across — unhindered, without ill will, without enmity” (8). It is important to note, however, that this love is equally extended towards oneself. As Sharon Salzberg, Buddhist teacher, author, and specialist in the area of loving-kindness, asserts, “You yourself, as much as anybody in the entire universe, deserve your love and affection.”

Buddhism was an earth-shattering force in its time, and continues to influence history and culture to this day. It has thrived throughout periods of instability and war, with adherents including royalty and aristocracy, beggars and peasants. Buddhism stresses praxis, an engaged focus on making the leap from text to the real world, applying the wisdom that has been handed down instead of developing abstract understanding. Throughout my college experience I have

been exploring Buddhist philosophy as I tried to become a mature and capable artist. I genuinely feel the tradition has enriched my worldview and helped me through the difficult realities of life. The realization of impermanence was something that awakened very early in my life, and mostly is associated with fear of death. It really breaks my heart that everything I love is subject to cessation. Trying to deeply engage with Buddhist practice came out of a desire for answers, for purpose, and for acceptance. In the process of adopting Buddhist practices, I have been better able to contextualize life and its purpose within the boundaries of impermanence, and develop a *Modus Operandi* that encompasses that truth.

Buddhism encourages us to temper our observations of the world and act in accordance to the Dhamma. The field on which I was able to carry out the moment-to-moment engagement with the lessons of this tradition was in the dance studio. Meditation and mindfulness helped me get through tough days of dance, or days where the realities of being a person came crashing into the studio where I tried to just be a dancer. Buddhist philosophy grounded my search for artistic expression, and informed the areas of inquiry that I wanted to pursue in my piece and throughout my life. More than that, it has shown me that dance is just one more playing field on which I can develop my insight and awareness. Even if I haven't found enlightenment, I can confidently say that the practice of Buddhist philosophy and tradition has been a source of happiness, growth, and refuge.

Praxis in Movement: the Creation of Walking Each Other Home

I have been thinking about what I wanted to create for my senior project for almost the entirety of my college career. The consistent structure of the Senior Project process was a big advantage, since I was able to observe how each senior class put together their pieces. Each dancer in the program is required to take part in two choreography processes, with each senior

leading their own process that leads to the performance of their piece. By being in past senior's pieces I was made aware of the challenges of making a piece, as well as how each choreographer tried to realize their vision. It also begged the question, increasingly with each set of processes: given that I had the space to present a message, whatever I wanted, what did I want to say? With that implicit mandate to dream up a worthwhile piece, the seeds of my piece started to take root. I have always been very inspired by music, and the themes I wanted to explore solidified through the process of finding songs that inspired me to create. The music I started with is very different from the final music I used, but two pieces in particular stayed and informed where I wanted to go. "Long Time Traveller" by the Wailin' Jennys, my first song, uses a cappella voices in order to create a sense of unity and an otherworldly quality. The main refrain proclaims a feeling of transcendence, present for but free from the human condition:

"I'm a long time travellin' here below I'm a long time travellin' away from home.

I'm a long time travellin' here below to lay this body down."

Hearing this song was a defining moment in choosing the idea that I wanted to pursue. The sentiment that we are spiritual beings having a human experience seemed like a good starting place, in order to ground the audience before taking them on a journey. The Dharma is seen as a refuge in Buddhist thinking, rising above the impermanent components of the world. I wanted the first image to be one of calm, unified abiding in that refuge. Using this interpretation as the thesis, the natural antithesis was a view of life as suffering and the reactionary impulse of mindless beings. This view can be summed up nicely in the Buddhist conception of *mara*, or delusion. In an attempt to show a point-counterpoint, I wanted to begin with an image of perfect wholeness, then suddenly drop into a world of loss and suffering. Originally I used a very lyrical, literal song that focused on a feeling of failure and not knowing how to handle the enormity of life to portray the world of *mara*. As the process continued, however, I wanted to lean on words

less, and I changed my music to something that conveyed stress, anxiety, and being lost, using an electronic vocal track that was continually shorted and augmented. I felt like the crux of the piece was the moment of synthesis, or a re-realization of the universal nature of the individual. Musically this was inspired by the song "Move On", from the musical *Sunday in the Park with George*. A song very near to my heart for many years now, the message of casting aside doubt and embracing the process of living generously has appealed to me through every tumultuous period of my life. From the beginning I knew I wanted to use this song as a way to bridge the gap between a deluded and awakened state of being. Once I had completed the return to an idyllic universal whole, I knew that I needed to create something that expressed sincere joy and happiness, but had little idea of what that would entail. Still, I came into the process armed with a tentative structure and plenty of pathways for exploration.

With the Buddhist ideals bouncing in my head being highlighted by the end of my college career and the continued effort to find refuge in this crazy world, I wanted to explore a hypothetical path to enlightenment in order to get at a possible compass for my own life. I realized that in order to do that, I would need to go to the other extreme, and explore the depth of suffering and delusion. I did not intend for the journey, even if it included each component, to be representative of my "answer" to all these big questions. I really wanted it to just be another stab at the truth. Given the open and allowing nature of the senior project process, I used the studio time we had as a way to conduct research. I began my senior piece construction by asking the dancers "what makes life worth it? What moments, big or small, take you out of your day-to-day drama and give you a sense of joy or peace?" Using conversation as a way of bringing out ideas, I asked a big question like that every other rehearsal or so, engaging with my dancers to get at a better understanding of the themes I wanted to explore. In the conversation about the things that lend value to living, a common theme of connection to others occurred.

Family and friends were often cited as the means of joy, and the buffer against the hardships of life. The act of dancing, which is obviously a shared joy among the group, was also held up as a central experience that lent worth to the act of living. Dance was valued as an individual form of liberation from the mental models that often interfere with the act of awakened experience. In addition, it was a means of facilitating connection to the self, the community, and universal principles. On the other hand, we all recognized the painful realities of the existence we were all engaged in, both in our individual struggles and each of the particular variations of the human condition we had contended with at this point in our lives. I often joked to my roommate that I had a captive audience for all of my existential worries, but in truth I could only try to create as open a forum as possible, then synthesize the results of our discussions and dance-making. In talking with my dancers, we explored what makes us whole, as well as the things that can make us feel insignificant or trapped. It was important for me to listen as openly as I could, not muddying the ideas as they came out. I recognized that my dancers were using their time and presence to help me bring this piece to life, and I really wanted to respect that commitment. More importantly, I didn't want a captive audience for a cast: I needed them to be on board for the ride, and the way I tried to get them on board was by jumping into it fully myself.

The philosophical foundation or artistic inquiry of my piece was very important to get right, but the actual creation of structure and choreography was a mental exercise that the dancers and I had to contend with as well. In the beginning I committed myself to always having some sort of choreography or area of focus ready when I came into rehearsal. I felt a strong need to have that, having seen how past seniors could struggle with a lack of preparation. Hoping to keep my dancers in the loop about this aspect, I tried to be very candid with them about the creative aspects that I was unclear about or struggling with. I wanted to zoom out as much as possible, retreating from the minutiae of the process and stay on the same page with

the overall construction of the work. In addition to using conversation as an experiential means of discovery, I leaned heavily on my dancer's interpretations of theme and movement to shape what the piece became. Creating a dance piece is inherently a collaboration between the choreographer and the dancers, and I wanted to lean into that as much as I could. The options for doing so were endless, and I employed many different means and iterations of collaboration to achieve what I felt was a clear, concise version of what I wanted to convey. The most common method of collaboration I used was offering a piece of choreography that I created beforehand, then have them manipulate it along guidelines I set. This allowed me to see what stood out to them in the movement, what they shied away from, and the potential nuance that could be achieved through further manipulation. We created simple gestures, which we combined into one big wordbank and created original movement phrases with. Sometimes I would give them only upper or lower body movements, and ask them to come up with the missing half. I was motivated to engage with these forms of collaboration, partly because of the need for efficient output of choreography, but the point of ultimate concern was feedback loops: in the viewing, manipulating, and reviewing of material, I was able to see what worked and what didn't over time. I was able to respond to gut instincts as to what the movement could be, and iterate until I had a version that spoke to me. Along the way I could reference what we said in discussion, or use imagery that felt along the same lines. Usually it was hyperbolic, and I often felt the limits of speech to really get at what I was looking for. My answer to those limitations was to go over the top in the hopes that my dancers would return even half of what I was looking for, and keep turning up the expression until it reached a point that I was happy with. I wanted to speak to the entire range of emotion, texture, and clarity. I wanted to hit 1 and 10 on a 1-10 scale in the same piece, so I needed to condition my dancers to embrace subtlety and strength, nuance and abandon. One of the most rewarding aspects of the choreography

process was watching how my dancers continually shed their reservations, trusting me more and more as they reached for greater levels of both exuberance and subtlety in movement.

Although I needed my dancers to trust me, I also needed to trust them. Nowhere was this more apparent than the last section of my piece, which I decided was going to be completely improvised. Chasing a feeling of pure and sincere love and joy, I decided that choreographing movement was antithetical to purity of emotion, so instead I let them dance in whatever way achieved that. The idea of two or three minutes of improvisation didn't sound that difficult to me, but it was one of, if not the most challenging aspects of this process. At first I just told them to dance with a feeling of joy and love, however they wanted. Frankly, that didn't work. I didn't know *why* it didn't work though, and we went through many cycles of confused, half-hearted dancing. It wasn't until one of my teachers, unprompted, told the seniors that if they intended to use improvisation in their piece, setting clear guidelines was key to success. In that moment I realized that my dancers weren't giving me what I wanted because I hadn't clearly defined what I wanted in the first place. Inspired by the directive, I decided to make a couple new guidelines for movement at a time, try that version of improvising out, and iterate as time went on. It was remarkable how my dancers were able to open up because they had clear tasks to accomplish. As we iterated it also opened them up to pursuing free movement, since they had a better idea of what they were chasing. The biggest challenge became my greatest joy, and I felt so much joy seeing them dance, as themselves and for each other.

As the rehearsal process progressed, I came up against the necessity of presenting a finished product. I always knew that it would have to occur at some point, but it was a jarring shift for me to go from focusing on ideas and exploration to focusing on making those ideas coherent, complex, and compelling. I felt a shift in my behavior, from a sense of being present for the process, aware of what was being expressed and teasing it out further, to being an active

wrangler of ideas, making them all fit into a neat narrative and frame. In some ways it was elucidating: I had the luxury of not making complete sense when I was in the early stages, and the room for potential growth was also room for confusion. My dancers, as I learned after the fact, had little idea what I was getting at at first, despite my frequent monologues on whatever aspect of the piece I was on that day. Honing in on a clear narrative arc helped a lot with that confusion. With a time crunch came increased motivation to distill my thoughts into a tangible form. That said, I did feel forced out of the mindful place that I was working from. While the ideas behind my piece certainly percolated for a long time, there was no neat bow in sight, and the implication behind a performance is that of a complete line of thinking. I began to retreat from honest exploration, choosing instead to focus on getting a rough draft done.

Frankly, this focus on product over process ultimately harmed both. Reflecting on the process with one of my dancers after the performances had ended, I mused about that shift from having an experience to making a product, and she was able to chart that shift in her process too. It changed my conduct in the studio, making me focus on how much time I had to finish instead of what feeling I was pursuing or how my dancers were reacting to my direction. While I'm thankful that I never blew up at them, I certainly became more tense, more demanding, and my excitement became tinged with an anxious overtone. As the gap between the potential of my piece and its final form shrank, I also began to become more judgemental about the overall quality of the piece. Was I really saying something necessary, or presenting a farcical regurgitation of an idea? Will anyone even "get" this? These questions and more became more frequent and nagging.

Thankfully, with the completion of the structure of the piece, I was able to relax into a more equanimous mindset. I was comforted by the completion of a full draft, and excited at the possibilities inherent in the stretching and molding of nuanced dancing. I have always

considered myself to be a good editor, and having time to do that allayed my fears of being unprepared. I also had the chance to really push my dancers and see how far they could take the ideas I had presented them. As the show approached, I was able to embrace one of the true joys of choreography and one of the essential lessons of Buddhist thinking: letting go. Seeing the piece function independently from my controlling hands allowed me to relax my grip on what the piece was. The realization of the fleeting nature of the show also ingrained the lesson of non-attachment. There were two shows, and then the piece was gone, preserved only in recording and in memory. Letting that fact sink in made me realize that the process had been the real journey, and that my metric for success should be that my dancers and I had an experience that felt nurturing and enlightening. Free from the constraints of expectation and fear of failure, I was able to truly embody the words that I said to my dancers at the start of every rehearsal: "I'm really excited to be making a piece, and I'm really happy to be making it with you all." Viewing my piece on stage was a wonderful experience, not only because I was able to bask in the glory of having completed a big part of my senior year, but because I was able to reflect on each dancer, and how we had walked together and with each other throughout this process. I also felt such gratitude for the experience as a whole, knowing that I was in a very special environment that allowed me to undergo this journey in the first place.

Reflecting on the creation of my piece and its relationship to the ideas that sparked it, I've realized that, in fact, my creation never lived up to the teachings of Buddhist philosophy at all. Excited at the prospect of creation and eager to synthesize all that I had learned, I created a structure in my head, a preconceived notion of how I thought the path to liberation looked. In the early days of the process I was able to let that structure be, choosing instead to explore the inherent qualities of suffering as a result of attachment, awakened being, and the moment of realization that sparks the shift from one to the other. Faced with the pressures of performance,

I retreated back to that preconceived structure, stymying a genuine unfolding of ideas in the hopes of doing justice to a stilted version of Buddhist thought that had taken up residence in my mind. Even when I was able to set aside my grand ideas, they still consciously and unconsciously informed what I did in the studio, how I felt about what people did, and altered my perception of what exploration, productivity, and success looked like. I am thankful that in the final rehearsals, and in viewing the performances, I was able to let go of all my expectations and just experience the work. I felt love for my dancers, who worked incredibly hard to make this piece happen at all. I felt love for myself, for following through on an idea from start to finish, and putting in the effort to lead my dancers diligently. Most of all, I felt love for this life, this profession, and this world, for placing me in a position to explore what it means to walk through this life with awareness, curiosity, and passion.

At the outset of this paper, I believed that it would be proper to place my piece somewhere within the realm of what the Buddhists would call *upaya*, or “skillful means.” As Taigen Dan Leighton describes, *upaya* “is an essential concept in Mahayana Buddhism. Skillful means, sometimes translated as tactfulness, expedients, or ingenuity, is the practice of applying awakening teaching to the diverse variety of students or practitioners” (Leighton 2004). As a sort of synthesis for my own learning over my college process, I attempted to reflect the Buddha nature, as I have understood it, as a deathless, transcendent state of being, rooted in compassionate love and free from the suffering of the material world. Branching out from abstract, textual understanding, I hoped that using my skills as a dancer and my conceptualization of Buddhist wisdom, I would be able to spark an understanding of enlightened thinking, if only in a small way. And so I engineered a concept that I thought would explain it, and carried out my process in order to service that concept. I had high ideals about speaking as a conduit of religious thought or reaching past my limited understanding and into the eternal, but

in truth I'm fairly confident that that never happened. In the end I catered to some of the fundamental trappings of the mind: expectation, self-judgement, and attachment to a set of ideas that never really had solid grounding.

In looking back on my piece, I can see that what began as an attempt to teach became a very personal learning experience. Taking my best shot, I carried out an embodied, experiential practice of Buddhist thought. In many ways I didn't rise to the occasion, and I think my piece reflects that. But in many ways, too, the process of creating and grappling with my initial mental vision provided tangible examples of how my thinking was flawed, and pointed me towards the truth. So, too, did my interactions with my dancers, showing me both how fixation on the mind and its contents can negatively impact your conduct in the world, and how loving attention to the present moment can be a force for encouragement, joy, and growth. If nothing else, I am confident that my choreography would be appreciated by any follower of Buddhism as an example of the Noble Search, which is described in the Ariyapariyesana Sutta, one of the autobiographical accounts of the Buddha's awakening in the Pali canon:

"And what is the noble search? There is the case where a person, himself being subject to birth, seeing the drawbacks of birth, seeks the unborn, unexcelled rest from the yoke: Unbinding. Himself being subject to aging... illness... death... sorrow... defilement, seeing the drawbacks of aging... illness... death... sorrow... defilement, seeks the aging-less, illness-less, deathless, sorrow-less, undefiled, unexcelled rest from the yoke: Unbinding. This is the noble search."

The path is made by walking, and *Walking Each Other Home* represents a small portion of the road I have carved, consciously and unconsciously, as I journey through this life.

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Additional research and and inspiration taken from the Harvard EdX course, "Buddhism Through its Scriptures."