

## Wellbeing Writing with Livia Massarelli



*Photo credit: Kyoko Ide*

This Wellbeing Writing comes from One Dance UK member, Livia Massarelli – a contemporary dance artist and holistic coach. Livia works internationally as a freelance performer, choreographer, and educator. She has danced in the creations of Emanuel Gat, Shobana Jeyasingh, Tony Adigun, Dora Frankel, Claudia Castellucci, and others. She has presented her pieces at festivals in Italy, England, and Portugal and collaborates with organisations such as AvantGarde, Equilibrio Dinamico, and Towards Vivencia. Livia is currently working at Rambert School as a guest lecturer, and as Rehearsal Director and holistic coach for Equilibrio Dinamico Dance Company.

### **HOW HAS YOUR PREVIOUS EXPERIENCE AS A DANCE ARTIST INFORMED YOUR APPLIED PRACTICE AND RESEARCH INTERESTS?**

I started meditating over 10 years ago. I was looking for support to face the challenges of being a professional dancer and a friend of mine introduced me to it. Cultivating self-awareness through meditation has positively impacted my life professionally and personally, and I recommend it to everyone.

Being a dancer myself, I experienced the challenges of this career and the need to find tools to establish a healthy way to work on myself, while maintaining the proper focus and discipline but without forgetting the joy of moving. My experience as a dance artist gives me a deep understanding of the sector and the mechanisms we tend to put in place while

training and working, especially when under pressure. I experienced the sector's difficulties, especially in finding a healthy balance between work and personal life and managing the financial and organisational uncertainty.

When I decided to research this topic, I was aware that there is a need for tools to navigate these difficulties in the community. I knew that some meditation approaches could be helpful but challenging, and I started questioning how I could effectively transmit this knowledge to be beneficial to other dancers. I wanted to improve the dance community, and I knew that I needed to do more research to successfully do it, moving beyond my personal experience.

I started by giving a structure to my meditation practice, following some teachers, and studying to learn more about the knowledge and the science behind it to have the skills to facilitate the meditation experience for other people. Eventually, I started leading some sessions for some colleagues before or after rehearsals, and I improved my practice based on the feedback received.

Then, I decided to conduct academic research on this topic and use my own "practice as research" by leading workshops and sessions and integrating meditation into my dance practice when I perform and teach. *So, my interest in this research topic started from the desire to share a unique tool I discovered in my personal journey and the passion I developed for it.*

## **WHAT DO YOU HOPE THAT A DANCER WILL GAIN FROM YOUR MEDITATION PRACTICE? WHAT COULD THEY EXPECT AS PART OF A SESSION WITH YOU?**

*Dancers often face challenges – physically and psychologically. It is essential to develop skills and strategies to support dancers in navigating their careers while taking care of their well-being. Meditation can be a valuable and supportive tool in doing so.*

The meditation practice I facilitate was explicitly developed for dancers. This specific meditation practice aims to help dancers develop healthy mind and body habits, to nurture positive emotions including love, compassion, and gratitude, and to promote resilience. Meditation practice is a form of training and requires commitment and intention. It can bring great transformation and results, but it needs to be constantly cultivated, like dancing.

For this reason, during my sessions I offer dancers some practical tools they can use in their own time to continue cultivating self-awareness and self-regulation. This particular practice supports the demands placed on dancers by using approaches, such as body awareness, visualisations, kinaesthetic imagery, and walking meditation. It also provides valuable elements to reflect on their profession – drawing on different meditation traditions and coaching. *Specific attention is given to the observation of the breath, breathwork, visualisation of body parts, visualisation and the manifestation of goals and desires, the repetition of words and specific sounds, and guided meditation.* In the guided meditation, the dancers can follow my voice and are led into a profound journey to connect with themselves, discover their mechanisms, and find the clarity to deal with them. These guided meditations have resulted from various practices I have studied, experienced myself, and continue to develop at present.

Another aim of these meditations is to instil a judgement-free form of self-awareness and self-kindness, and to provide the participants with a helpful mindfulness tool.

*There are moments of group and individual reflection in all the sessions to support dancers in organising and processing their feelings and thoughts.*

Meditation is a way to become aware of what is happening in the present moment, acknowledge it, observe it – and thanks to the clarity obtained – learn how to cope with it. This is what I hope dancers can gain from my meditation sessions.

## WHAT IS THETAHEALING? AND HOW DOES THIS FEATURE AS A PART OF YOUR MEDITATION PRACTICE WITH DANCERS?

[ThetaHealing®](#) is a highly versatile meditation technique for self-development created by to create positive change. This method supports people in understanding subconscious limiting beliefs and feelings that are holding them back from thriving, and helps them find a mental, spiritual, physical, and emotional balance.

I am a certified ThetaHealing® practitioner. This technique has definitely influenced the method I developed to work with dancers. It has offered me valuable practical tools to promote self-awareness using guided meditation, visualisation, kinaesthetic imagery, and specific questions to prompt reflection.

Alongside ThetaHealing®, I have also been inspired by other techniques and traditions. I have trained as a Meditation Guide with exploring [Mindfulness-Based Self-Development](#), [Buddhist meditation techniques](#), and psychology.

My studies and experiences in the field of meditation – exploring the ancient contemplative Buddhist practice and the modern techniques of ThetaHealing® – have allowed me to develop my own way of transmitting this knowledge and wisdom in a secular way. This experience, combined with my extensive knowledge and experience in the dance world have led me to create a specific meditation approach designed for dancers, considering their particular skills and needs.

Deep body awareness and mindful use of the breath are fundamental in my work, alongside different types of meditation such as mindfulness, visualisations, analytic meditation, and guided meditation. [The body's centrality is essential in my work with dancers, considering dancers' deep connection with their own body as it is the primary tool of their work.](#)

All my sessions start with a meditation to reconnect with the body and its sensations. [It is a moment to simply acknowledge the body's beauty and hard work and learn how to give attention and care to it.](#) This is something that dancers sometimes forget. The body can be a great gateway to access our whole selves, but it is only one aspect of a much more complex picture. For this reason, [I have a holistic approach that considers each dancer's mental, physical, emotional, and psychological elements.](#)

Meditation is a great practice to gain self-awareness, learn our own mechanisms, and understand how to deal with them with clarity. Another experience that influenced my approach was partaking in "[Towards Vivencia](#)", a mental training programme developed by Jorge Crecis. By engaging with the material as both a practitioner and coach, I expanded my current knowledge with newfound tools to understand and train the mind supported by scientific evidence.

Currently, I'm training to be a certified [mental coach](#), and my studies in this field are enriching my method.

## CAN YOU TELL US ABOUT YOUR RESEARCH INVESTIGATING THE EFFECTS OF MEDITATION PRACTICE ON DANCERS' WELL-BEING?

In 2019, as part of my MA in Performance at London Contemporary Dance School, I carried out my first piece of academic research on the effects of meditation on dancers' well-being. Meditation played an essential role in my well-being, and I was interested in seeing if it could be the same for other dancers. Researching this topic allowed me to deepen my study on meditation and its effects while exploring the fields of psychology, physiology, and neuroscience.

I investigated the effects of my practice on a small group of freelance dancers, and the outcomes of this study were incredibly positive. After engaging in daily meditation practice the results showed that the dancers found an increased sense of calmness, reduced perceived stress, and generally enhanced self-awareness. They reported a heightened body awareness and a better understanding of their thoughts and movement.

In 2020, during the pandemic, I started another qualitative research project collaborating with Rambert School of Ballet and Contemporary Dance, with funding from The Conservatoire of Dance and Drama. Phaedra Petsilas, the Head of Studies of Rambert School, welcomed my interest in exploring the effects of meditation on dance students in a Conservatoire context and supported me in conducting this research.

This study was a small-scale qualitative research project conducted on second-year undergraduate contemporary dance students at Rambert School.

The investigation lasted eight weeks, during which the students took part in live weekly online meditation sessions and practised autonomously by listening to pre-recorded meditations.

The data were gathered through reflective journals, final questionnaires, and semi-structured interviews.

This study aimed to investigate the effects of meditation practice on dancers' well-being, particularly on their perceived stress, anxiety, and mindfulness, and consequently on their performance. The aim was to offer a self-care toolkit rooted in meditation to support the students in dealing with the specific difficulties of professional dance training and foster positive approaches to confront potential adversities.

The main challenges presented by the dancers included dealing with expectations, self-esteem, managing perceived stress and anxiety, developing the ability to focus, maintaining an enhanced body awareness, and developing autonomy and the ability to self-regulate.

This study demonstrates the potentially positive impact of specific meditation practice on the perceived stress and mindfulness of a group of dance students, highlighting the potential of engagement in meditation practice(s) to improve dancers' well-being and performance. My research has helped to demonstrate the importance of offering self-care tools to dance students to help them foster positive approaches and ways to face adversity.

The students who participated in the research stated that they experienced positive effects on their self-perception that affected their everyday lives and dance activities. All the participants noticed positive effects on their body perception, such as increased body

relaxation, awareness of tension and injuries, and an enhanced sense of groundedness. They also noticed some benefits on their self-awareness and concentration, such as increased clarity of thoughts and emotions, decreased self-judgment, enhanced self-regulation, the development of coping skills for perceived stress and anxiety, increased self-acceptance and self-confidence, and increased sense of calmness and relaxation.

Of particular interest was how meditation practice affected dance activities. Dancers noticed a heightened self-awareness and ability to cope with challenges in class through enhanced focus and clarity of their thoughts and emotions. This means they could focus better during classes and notice earlier if a negative judgment arose and changed their thought patterns. They also reported a clearer body perception while moving and preventing and dealing with injuries. The students also mentioned an increased self-regulation capacity, self-acceptance, non-judgment of self while dancing, and more confidence in improvisation classes.

I hope this academic research will stimulate further studies in this direction and convince dancers and dance institutions of the benefits of meditation, leading to changes in dance institutions' activities, recommendations, and offerings for dancers.

## **WHERE CAN PEOPLE GO TO LEARN MORE ABOUT YOUR WORK AND PRACTICE?**

To know more about me and my work, you can visit my website and follow me on social media. I'm always happy to have a conversation, so I would welcome anybody to get in touch by email.

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