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Finding the Sacred in Nia Dance By Hiie Saumaa

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The Nia Technique was developed by Debbie Rosas and Carlos Aya Rosas <https://nianow.com/company-story> in the United States in the 1980s. In this mindful, holistic movement practice, we focus on tracking physical sensations, finding joy and pleasure in movement, and moving in ways that feel unique and organic to us as individuals. Nia draws from martial arts (Tai Chi, Taekwondo, Aikido), dance arts (jazz dance, modern dance, and Duncan dance), and somatic practices (the Alexander Technique, Feldenkrais Method, and yoga). We transition from easy-to-follow choreography and structured elements to movement improvisation and free dance. Participants both follow and lead, learning steps and following the instructor's

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verbal guidance encourages new movements and increases movement vocabulary. This is important because left to our own devices, we might rely on a limited scope of movements and dynamics. Through embodied movement improvisations and “tweaking,” “personifying,” “stylizing,” or “playing with” the given steps, dancers learn how to self-initiate, listen to their own movement needs, give voice to their creativity, and honor what their body, heart, and soul yearn to do and express at a given moment.

The spiritual or the sacred are not explicitly foregrounded in the Nia practice. The aim of this somatic method is to increase participants’ sense of wellbeing through movement and to cultivate physical awareness and emotional connection to movement and the body. However, both as a participant and a teacher, I feel like Nia classes open me up to something that does feel “spiritual,” “soulful,” and “connected.” How does that happen?

I first encountered Nia dance during a challenging time in my life. I was heading into a serious burnout from my academic studies as a doctoral student abroad. I was exhausted, struggling with health problems, and felt insecure about my place in academia. I was taking courses and preparing for my doctoral exams and my dissertation project, but my heart was not in it. I felt disconnected from my work and lost on my life path.

What helped me during this time were the Nia classes that I found at my neighborhood gym on the Upper West Side in Manhattan. Taking a class was a transformative experience – the movements felt beautiful, satisfying, natural, empowering, graceful, and nourishing for my body and soul. My heart and body were singing to the music. Through slower and embodied, mindful movements where I had a chance to not just execute the movements but also to sense what these movements felt like in my body, my feet started to heal from a year-long struggle with Achilles tendonitis which had made each step painful. In these classes, I felt absorbed in the flow and at ease. I started to find myself again, also in my writing and studies. I changed my dissertation topic, at an unusually late point in the process, and wrote it on literature and meditation. I became a certified instructor of the Nia technique and other somatic practices and started giving classes. I started to write about dance and movement. I have not stopped dancing, practicing, and teaching Nia ever since I encountered it in 2009.



Hiie Saumaa (Photo by Lauri Kulpsoo)

The reason I narrate this story of how I found Nia is to suggest that one way to discover the spiritual or the “larger than me” in Nia – or any type of movement practice – is to consider the way in which these practices enter and shape our lives. Dancing Nia is not only pleasurable, healthy, and strengthening for the body and mind, but it can be an incredibly powerful, active force that moves your life in a different direction. Out of stagnation and feeling stuck we move toward new paths that are more in alignment with who we are. I never considered myself a dancer, felt very self-conscious about dancing, and yet dance is my main occupation now. As a literature major, I never thought that I would be writing about dance and movement. Understanding the way in which Nia has changed my life makes me view Nia and other movement practices from a spiritual perspective. “It came to me,” “it was meant to be,” “my guiding angels put it on

my path” are the phrases that I hear myself say inwardly.

To me, dancing Nia offers a daily reminder of the sacredness of phenomena that we tend to take for granted. As I inhale and exhale at the beginning of class, I feel thankful for the ability to do so – to have the gift of another day to be alive. I sense my feet on the ground and appreciate the support of the earth underneath me. As I reach my arms toward the sky, I feel connected to a sense of opportunity and hope. I feel uplifted and held. As I move the spine, explore the range of movement in the hips and the pelvic area, move the ribcage side to side, dance the elbows and wrists, find new patterns for the feet, and travel around in space, I feel playful, joyful, and creative. These are resources that offer resilience during times of stress and help meet life’s challenges. Dancing to music, I feel connected to the song of the soul expressed in the arts. In the cool-down, I sense tingling in the chest area, in the heart, and see images of people, places, and colors that I love. I feel grateful for the ability to move. I sense the sacredness of the body, as in it I carry the flame of my life and with it I do my life work and serve others. I feel compassionate, connected, and alive.

When I teach and dance Nia, I sometimes feel like I am channeling messages that are not quite mine alone – the words and images seem to come from somewhere, as if they were given, gifted. When the participants say after class that they feel better physically and emotionally and feel more whole, calm, joyful, hopeful, and appreciative of their lives and the people in their lives, I know that dance is a source of transformative power that nourishes and heals. I trust myself to the embrace of this force. It leads me and will continue to lead me – closer to the heart, the soul, and the spirit.



Hii Saumaa PhD (Photo by Lauri Kulpsoo)

Hii SAUMAA, PhD, is a somatic movement educator and a dance writer/scholar. She's from Estonia and currently based in Paris. She writes about movement and health, dance history, and the artistic process. She teaches Nia dance, BodyLogos Strength Training (somatic approach to conditioning and stretching), and JourneyDance (inspirational free dance practice, a movement ritual). She loves to inspire people to enjoy the energy, healing, and aliveness that dancing, and movement can give us. <https://www.hiiesaumaa.com/>)

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