

## The Continued Value of Teaching and Practicing Somatic Dance Online

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Hiie Saumaa teaching a “Dance and the City” session online at Columbia Global Centers I Paris.  
Photo by Samantha Csenge.

# The Continued Value of Teaching and Practicing Somatic Dance Online

**Hiie Saumaa**

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*This article discusses the benefits of virtual somatic dance classes. Based on my experience with teaching online Nia dance classes during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond, I argue that several key principles of somatic movement translate effectively into online environments, and I make the case for the continued validity of this practice.*

I have been teaching somatic dance classes online via Zoom since the outset of restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020. In what follows, I investigate the benefits of teaching and taking virtual somatic dance classes, which include a deeper sense of physical sensations, an expanded community, an outlet for more timid movers, and new possibilities for imagination and imagery during the class. Key principles of somatic movement translate well into online environments and can continue helping participants beyond the pandemic.

I teach Nia dance, a practice developed in the United States in the 1980s, which combines free dance and easy-to-follow choreography inspired by martial arts, dance, and healing arts. As a freelancer, I teach these classes from my studio apartment in Paris, France, and my students are mostly from the United States (many from New York City), Europe, and South Africa. My students are nonprofessional dancers or former professional dancers, ranging in age from their thirties to their sixties.

The hour-long class has a community orientation and is adaptable to participants of different ages and fitness levels. I, as the Nia instructor, show modifications throughout the class, and the participants are encouraged to “tweak” movements according to their own needs. “Chair Nia” and “Moving to Heal,” subprograms of the practice, are geared toward people who are recovering from injuries or have special movement needs (Nia n.d.).

## SAMPLE CLASS

It is 12 noon Eastern Standard Time, 6:00 p.m. Central European Time. My computer on the floor, I lean over the keyboard and click Admit All on Zoom to let students into my virtual dance class taking place in Paris, France. Here they are—from New York City, Berlin, Paris, Tartu, Wiesbaden, Madrid, Chicago, Bucharest, Cambridge, and Columbus. I have prepared the space to the best of my ability: I have pushed to the sides of my 226-square-foot studio apartment the two foldable Ikea chairs that during the night function as my bed.

After welcoming the participants and checking in with how they are feeling, I introduce the focus for the class. Sometimes I choose a focus that relates to a body part, such as dancing and sensing the spine, the pelvis, or the feet. At other times, I set the focus on a phenomenon or action related to movement, such as “traveling in space,” “contraction and expansion,” “breath and movement,” or “sens-

ing movement flow.” Sometimes the focus is more abstract and poetic, offered as food for the imagination and inner contemplation, such as “sensing compassion and gratitude through movement,” “dancing with shadows,” or “dancing aliveness.”

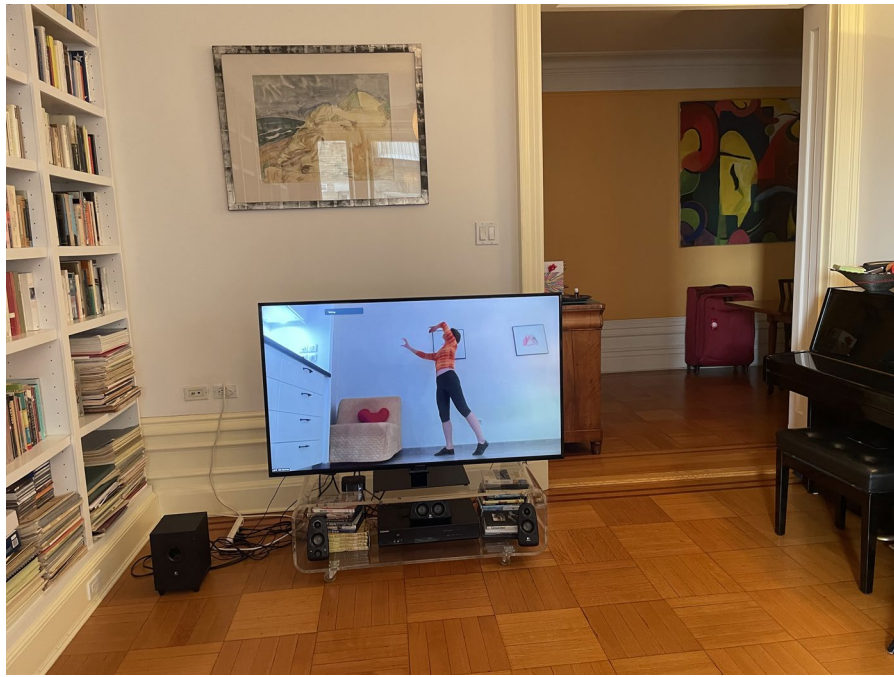
Before I “share computer sound” and start the playlist, I ask the participants to take a walk in their dance space and notice their physical sensations. I encourage them to let gentle, spontaneous movements emerge, such as moving their shoulder blades or bending their torso to the side or shaking their arms. I guide them to check in with how they feel at that moment. What do they notice about their inhales and exhales? The way their foot touches the ground? Their alignment? Are there any tensions in the body? How do they feel emotionally? What are their energy levels like?

I then face the wall right in front of me, my back to the camera lens, and invite them to follow simple movement patterns to music. For example, the right leg steps to the front and back to the original position; the left leg steps to the front and back. We repeat this movement four times. Then the right leg steps to the side, and the left leg steps to the side four times. We add movements for the arms, such as big circles as the leg steps forward, and the arms reaching horizontally as the leg steps to the side. I show them that we can add a cha-cha-cha (three quick steps) to change the leg. After a few repetitions, I ask the participants to find their own movements for the arms while keeping the pattern for the feet. Soon we break the pattern into free dance where the participants can feel the music and move as they wish.

The playlist evolves from slower songs to more upbeat songs; there is a mix of instrumental and vocal music in multiple languages. The patterned movements include slow, flowy, sensual movements as well as kicks, punches, and moves inspired by martial arts. During the songs where the participants are free to come up with their own movements, we skip, dash, shimmy, drum with the body, and move like robots, like seven-year-olds, like someone with no worries, like someone lost in a forest, like someone promenading in Paris, and so on. We act out imaginary scenarios, or we simply let the music and the feelings take over and follow an inner journey.

When I work with patterns, I give directions and glance over my shoulder toward the computer every now and then. I trust the participants are still there even if I do not see them all the time. I trust they are still dancing and connecting to the experience even if all of their voices are muted on the screen and I do not sense their kinetic energy physi-

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Hiie Saumaa teaching an online Nia class from her studio apartment in Paris. Photo by Kathrin Stengel.

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cally. During the free dance songs, I look at the screen and see my students moving in their own ways, in their own spaces. I decide to overlook the ways in which we are disconnected from one another and feel our connectedness instead. We are dancing together at that very moment to the same music, as a community. I trust movement does its healing magic even if I am not in the same physical space as my students.

We end the class with a cool-down, and the participants may either follow what I do on the screen or find their own way to gently stretch, absorb, and rest. These last moments are significant because we often feel most in touch with ourselves and aware of our sensations at the end of the class when the outer movements are not prominent but the memory of them is fresh. I end the class with a brief guided meditation or a body scan and silence.

## SOMATICS

Somatics is an umbrella term for methods such as the Alexander Technique, the Feldenkrais Method, Body-Mind Centering, Continuum, Tamalpa Life/Art Process, Gaga, Nia dance, JourneyDance, 5Rhythms, and SuryaSoul, to name a few. The coinage of the term *somatics* is attributed to philosopher and Feldenkrais practitioner Thomas Hanna. In his article “What is Somatis?,” Hanna (1986) emphasized that the soma is the body perceived not from the third-person point of view, outwardly, through someone else’s gaze, but from within, by oneself. “The soma, being internally perceived, is categorically distinct from a body, not because the subject is different but because the mode of viewpoint is dif-

ferent: it is immediate proprioception—a sensory mode that provides unique data,” he noted (Hanna 1986, 4).

Somatic practices have different historical lineages, and their pedagogical approaches can be distinct from one another. They share several key ideas, though. Noticing what is happening inside the body, tracking physical sensations, feeling movements rather than merely executing them, and using movement as a mode of self-inquiry and healing are essential principles of somatic practices (Saumaa 2018, 160). The Alexander Technique and the Feldenkrais Method focus on developing nuanced bodily awareness and how we use the body in daily activities. Nia, 5Rhythms, Biodanza, Gaga dance, SuryaSoul, the Tamalpa Life/Art Process, and contact improvisation, among others, include dance movement and moving in space. These practices can be quite vigorous physically, as opposed to the gentler and more awareness-based practices of the Alexander Technique and the Feldenkrais Method.

Somatic movement classes help us pay attention to how we feel physically, emotionally, mentally, and perhaps even in the soul or the spirit as we move. In somatic movement classes, practitioners are first and foremost developing the connection to their own self and their movement choices and ability. We dance for health, well-being, joy, liveliness, vitality, and self-expression (Saumaa 2019, 239). Some somatic dance methods, such as Nia and SuryaSoul Soma, include easy-to-follow choreographic sequences next to segments where the participants can dance freely, without any patterns, but there is always an invitation to make the movements your own, to tweak, to pause, and to modify.

A number of my students have shared that dancing and connecting inwardly while moving goes beyond physical

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Hiie Saumaa teaching an online dance workshop at My Little Paris. Photo by Elisa Rummelhard.

movement: They connect to their emotions; they find themselves feeling more compassion and forgiveness toward themselves and others; they start to hear the “voice of the heart”; they feel more hopeful about their lives and stronger in the face of challenges; they feel connected to some higher guiding power; and they get intuitive, flash-like insights about some important decision (Saumaa 2021, 45). The focus of somatics—increased self-awareness, a connection to multiple aspects of one’s life, a sense of wholeness—is thus different from dance classes where the goal is to learn a technique and acquire choreographic patterns.

## BENEFITS OF SOMATIC DANCE CLASSES ONLINE

Teaching and taking somatic dance classes online had several benefits during the height of the pandemic, and many

people continue taking these classes. Most obviously, the people who continue taking dance classes online find that the classes fit their schedules and are easy to arrange in the context of their lives. From my experience during the pandemic, I learned that there are many other reasons why online somatic dance classes worked and continue to work.

### Inner Connection to Movement

The online environment is suitable for somatic dance classes for several reasons. The focus on moving for health, inner connection, self-care, and freedom of movement make somatic classes well-fit for online teaching, as these aspects can be attended to in online formats. Being a part of a community is important in Nia: In my in-person classes I ask the participants to dance in pairs, for example, and we feel

343 inspired and energized by seeing the movements of the  
344 other dancers. Dancing in a pair or a group is not essential  
345 in Nia, however. In a somatic practice, the focus is on the  
346 individual's experience with his or her body and movement.  
347 An online class, where the student is alone in the dance  
348 space (in most cases), is in alignment with the essence of  
349 the practice.

350 In Nia and many other methods, the teacher does not  
351 have to teach complex choreography and partner work  
352 where the precision of movements and the physical pres-  
353 ence of the teacher and the other movers are crucial. The  
354 concept of "choreography" and "a pattern" is much more  
355 relaxed in somatic dance classes: The visual exactness of  
356 movements is not as essential as finding pleasure, connec-  
357 tion, well-being, and one's own voice through movement.  
358 These aspects make online settings a workable environ-  
359 ment for somatic dance classes.

360 Online somatic dance classes might help students be  
361 bolder and more exploratory in movement. One goal of  
362 a somatic movement class is to help students tune in with  
363 what their movement needs are and what kinds of move-  
364 ments feel better in their body and to adjust the move-  
365 ments accordingly, for example, by varying the size, range,  
366 or speed of the movements. One of my students noted that  
367 she enjoys the online format because she can adjust the  
368 movements in the choreographed sequences according to  
369 her energy levels or physical condition, without being dis-  
370 ruptive for the other dancers. In an in-person class, she  
371 feels like changing the choreographed sequences, even  
372 with the teacher's open invitation to adapt, calls too much  
373 attention to her movements. She feels freer dancing in her  
374 own way in her own space.

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## 377 **Emotional Needs and Confidence**

378 Dancing in the privacy of our own space can help us attend  
379 to our emotions. During periods of sadness and grief, the  
380 idea of dancing in an in-person community might be what  
381 we need, or it might be exactly what we do not need; danc-  
382 ing in our private space might help us during a difficult  
383 time. A student of mine remarked that in an online class, she  
384 lets her feelings be free, and when she feels an emotional  
385 release or a wave of sadness, she cries. In an in-person class  
386 she would "control" herself and never cry.

387 The online setting, with the option of turning the video  
388 off, works well students who are shy. Often what prevents  
389 people from coming to in-person dance classes is the feel-  
390 ing that they are stepping into an environment where every-  
391 body else already "knows" how to dance. They do not know  
392 what to expect and are afraid of feeling exposed. One stu-  
393 dent noted, "Your classes work great for me online because  
394 I'm not as confident with the moves yet and I feel more  
395 unseen (except for the cats) and I can be more relaxed."

396 Online dance classes might be especially beneficial for  
397 men. Several of my male participants have remarked that  
398 they prefer coming to online classes because they feel more  
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in control of the space. For men in particular it might be 400  
challenging to come to dance classes as there is a strong 401  
stereotype that dance is "for women" and "is not one of the 402  
acceptable male hobbies like soccer and cars," as one of my 403  
male students put it. In an online class, they can work on 404  
their confidence as movers in a setting that feels safe for 405  
them. One of my students, a 39-year-old veteran, heavy-set 406  
and with strong musculature, built up his confidence as a 407  
mover in my online Nia classes and now goes to in-person 408  
ballet classes! He has gathered skills, body knowledge, and, 409  
above all, confidence that he can now use in other dance 410  
settings, either in dance classes or on a dance floor. 411

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## 415 **Community**

416 In an online class, we do not feel one another's movements 417  
viscerally—we do not physically sense other people's move- 418  
ments next to us—but we might still feel like we are a part of 419  
a community. The online environment creates an additional 420  
dance community, next to in-person ones, and it might be a 421  
community that we would not be able to access in the places 422  
where we live. In the words of one participant, "It is so nice 423  
to see the other dancers every week from different places in 424  
the world." During the pandemic and beyond, this interna- 425  
tional dancing community has helped us feel more "one" in 426  
the sense that we are living at this particular time in history 427

428 Online classes have an element of "liveness" that is lack- 429  
ing in recorded videos or exercise tapes. Even though we 430  
are not in the same physical space, the class is happening 431  
at a particular hour, with a particular set of people. This 432  
can help people stay with a movement practice. They might 433  
also start feeling accountable—"other people are waiting 434  
for me to be there"—and might look forward to seeing the 435  
other movers. Several students have mentioned that the 436  
ability to chat with other movers at the beginning and end 437  
of the class has helped them feel a sense of community 438  
and motivated them to come to class. This feature was very 439  
important during the height of the pandemic when people 440  
needed help staying active and motivated, and it continues 441  
to be important. 442

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## 445 **Dance Space**

446 Thinking about my living space as a dance space began in 447  
2018–2019, when I was living as an artist-in-residence at the 448  
Cité Internationale des Arts in Paris. At the Cité, each artist 449  
had a separate studio, and our studio was our living space 450  
and work space at the same time. Before living at the arts 451  
residency, I was dancing in movement studios and only used 452  
my living space for practices that did not require a lot of 453  
movement in space, such as yoga or stretching. In my studio 454  
at the artist residency, I carved out a designated dance area, 455  
put down mats to make the concrete floor more comfort- 456  
able for my dancing feet, and treated it as my special, sacred

229 dance area where I attend to the wisdom that emanates from  
230 the moving body. Dance became even more closely a part of  
231 my life because it unfolded in the space where I lived. Dur-  
232 ing the pandemic, I was able to translate this conception of  
233 heightened awareness of space to my studio apartment and  
234 assist my students with this, too.

235 My students and I became active designers of our own  
236 dance spaces: My students turned their bedrooms, living  
237 rooms, kitchens, or terraces into temporary dance spaces.  
238 During the COVID-19 lockdowns, all the different activities  
239 of my life were gathered into the small square-like space of  
240 my small studio apartment. This is where I teach, dance,  
241 write, create, cook, eat, sleep, relax, and communicate with  
242 friends, family, and students on Zoom or Skype.

243 One crucial element of my students' and my dance  
244 experience was missing—the act of stepping out of the  
245 space where we live and work and undertaking a journey to  
246 come to a dance studio, with its specific atmosphere, light-  
247 ing, type of floor, plants, and interior design. How do you  
248 transition from your previous activity and frame of mind  
249 to the experience of dancing if both unfold in the same  
250 physical space?

251 To help my students with transitioning and creating a  
252 dance space, I encourage them to find elements that help  
253 them set the dance space—dimming the lights, setting  
254 a candle in a safe place, and bringing extra blankets for  
255 relaxation and meditation at the end of the class. At the  
256 beginning of the class, I ask them to walk around in the  
257 space. “Take a walk in your sacred dance space, your stage  
258 today,” I tell them. “Where does the light come from in your  
259 space? Let’s acknowledge with our eyes the plants or flow-  
260 ers that you might have in your place, maybe even wave a  
261 little hello to them. Let’s look at the ceiling and stretch the  
262 throat—how great to have a roof over our head! What col-  
263 ors or shapes or objects attract your attention as you walk  
264 around in the space? What is your space telling you about  
265 how you feel today?”

266 From the invitation to notice the space, I guide the par-  
267 ticipants to engage their mind’s eye inside the body: “Feel  
268 the contact the feet are making with the ground, relax the  
269 knees, soften the low back, and allow any desired move-  
270 ment or stretch to express itself. Maybe the spine wants to  
271 move; maybe you want to reach the arms to the ceiling;  
272 maybe the shoulder blade wants to lift and lower,” I add.  
273 Taking a moment to notice the dance space and then mov-  
274 ing the attention inside the body helps participants ground  
275 themselves in the present moment and be aware of their  
276 surrounding space, their body, and the movement that is  
277 emanating from the inside out.

278 Several participants have mentioned that the somatic  
279 dance classes have helped them appreciate the spaces they  
280 inhabit. One student mentioned that her small space had  
281 started to feel claustrophobic during the pandemic. The  
282 invitation to notice the objects, the colors, and the light in  
283 her space during the class helped her look at her environ-  
284 ment with new eyes. “The dance experience has made me

286 appreciate my indoor environment, feel comfortable in it,  
287 and to reimagine it as a dance space,” she noted.

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The pandemic heightened the importance of using imagi-  
nation in a movement practice. During the most severe lock-  
down in the spring of 2020 in France, we were allowed to  
go outside for one hour a day, within a 1-kilometer radius  
of our homes, with a signed authorization form. For the city  
dwellers, many of us living in tight spaces, access to nature  
was limited: Even the parks were closed. During this time, I  
realized how important it is for the health and well-being of  
my mind to imagine myself in other surroundings, beyond  
these walls where I get sunlight only for a couple of hours  
in the early evening, and to experience nature via the imagi-  
nation. I was unable to cover distance physically, but in my  
mind I could.

305 I began dedicating more time for creative movement  
306 and playful, imaginative sequences in my classes. Short sce-  
307 narios emerged in class: We were going to parties, clad in  
308 a fancy yellow dress and carrying a red purse; we walked  
309 around in the Luxembourg Garden with parasols, looking  
310 at people chatting and eating their sandwiches; we traveled  
311 to other planets on a magical carpet and saw deserts, fan-  
312 tastic triangular creatures, and lush gardens where every-  
313 one was dancing salsa; we took a flying saucer to see our  
314 family and felt our hearts expand as we hugged them; we  
315 imagined dancing with seven friends during one song and  
316 appreciated their uniqueness; lying down on the floor, we  
317 imagined painting a field of flowers on the ceiling with our  
318 legs and admired the outcome.

319 In an online dance program titled “Dance and the  
320 City,” which I developed in collaboration with Columbia  
321 Global Centers in Paris, we took the participants from dif-  
322 ferent parts of the world on an imaginary journey to Paris  
323 via dance (Columbia Global Centers n.d.). We visited the  
324 Seine, Montmartre, the bridge Pont Neuf, the Luxembourg  
325 Garden, and Columbia’s Global Centers at Reid Hall. We  
326 glanced at the Louvre and the Eiffel Tower, danced under  
327 the stars of the “City of Lights,” and joined the joggers in  
328 the Parc des Buttes Chaumont. I used the Nia technique  
329 and added the element of dancing the stories that might  
330 unfold in these places, supported by brief videos that we  
331 had recorded at these locations as well as photos and music.  
332 At the end of the six-week program, participants wrote to  
333 me to say they had cried and were “sad to leave Paris,” a  
334 sign that they had traveled here in their imagination and  
335 in their memories, as many had personal connections to  
336 this city.

## 337 338 339 340 341 342

During the pandemic, when access to places and people  
was limited, dancing became one important way to nourish

343 the imagination and connect to the joy of life and a sense  
344 of vitality. Somatic movement classes online helped partici-  
345 pants to heal and cope during this time. My students delib-  
346 erately turned to movement as a force not just to make them  
347 feel stronger physically or to stay in shape, but also to cre-  
348 ate structure in their lives, connect to like-minded people,  
349 and calm and clear the mind. They discovered more ways  
350 in which dance can be a transformational force. During this  
351 time when so many people struggled with anxiety, depres-  
352 sion, fatigue, fear, loss of motivation, financial stress, and  
353 aimlessness, online movement classes were and continue to  
354 be important sources for self-care, community, and connec-  
355 tion.

356 Among the many positive aspects of the online teaching  
357 experience during the pandemic was the realization that  
358 dance is possible under many different circumstances and  
359 in many different places. We do not necessarily need to be  
360 in a big space with grand views and very comfortable con-  
361 ditions. Whatever space we have available can become the  
362 space for our own sacred dance and connection to the body  
363 if we bring this dimension and intention to our experience.  
364 We can develop new appreciation of the spaces where we  
365 are, and we can employ the imagination to go beyond our  
366 walls and visit other places, people, and imaginary lands.  
367 This willingness to bring dance to different spaces and to  
368 fill our living spaces with the energy of dance and the power  
369 of the imagination were some of the most enriching and  
370 touching aspects of this challenging time.

371 My experiences teaching online during the pandemic  
372 changed the way in which I teach. Before the pandemic,  
373 I never considered teaching dance online. Now, I see  
374 online classes as an important part of my teaching and a  
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way to work with an international community. It has enlivened my imagination, my sense of place, and my sense of what is possible. Online dance classes offer us another space and community in which to dance next to our in-person spaces and communities. We have more dance in our lives. ✨

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