

# NIA: LETTING GO AND MOVING THE BODY'S WAY



Post Views 329

I was sitting at a wide wooden table, enjoying the morning sunshine as I did some writing at a musician friend's house in Albany, New York. His mother walked in and in her usual charmingly caring way asked if I had slept well, if she could get me "something to drink, something to eat?"

Seemingly disappointed by my not needing anything, she tried one more offer: "Would you like to go to a Nia class with me this morning?"

I couldn't resist finally saying yes to her.

# Experiencing Nia

Heading in, I was picturing a seniors' dance class, something to encourage mobility and flexibility. The people my hostess greeted in the lobby of the YMCA were certainly in the right age bracket, although upstairs in the huge classroom there were a wider range of age groups represented.

I took a spot far enough back that I wouldn't be in anyone's way but where I could still see the instructor. The class voted between two music options for the day and the Chicago soundtrack won out.



What a lovely surprise the class turned out to be! The instructor's sense of mood and phrasing was excellent. She took us smoothly through a variety of movements, step patterns, turns, leaps and kicks. I recognized elements from jazz and modern dance as well as some kind of martial arts kicks. The atmosphere was welcoming and joyful; when we did our "best tango around the room!" I met others' eyes to share smiles. I felt free to participate wholeheartedly, following her exhortations to "listen to your body! Make the movement your own!"

When the soundtrack had run its course, our instructor had us do some stretches on the floor before standing together in a circle. She led us through a guided meditation, picturing various colors that brought us through different feelings. It reminded me of the end of a yoga class I'd once done. Normally I feel a bit silly in such an environment, but here it seemed fitting. We were all just enjoying a moment to connect with our bodies and be present with our selves and each other.

After the class, I was eager to introduce more people to this delightful experience. What an accessible way to bring people into the world of dance! What a joyful way for social dancers to simply enjoy moving their own bodies, without worrying about perfect timing or lines! What a beautiful way for adults of different generations to enjoy music together!

## Learning More About Nia From Pat Hunter

My instructor that day, Pat Hunter, agreed to an interview by phone the following week. Pat was a registered nurse by profession but has been teaching Nia for nearly 20 years. She is now a black belt instructor, meaning that she has worked up through the white, green, blue, and brown belts, each of which requires at least one and a half to two years of work in addition to a week's worth of intensive instructor training. I learned that while the lower level instructors have to follow set choreographies,



*A snapshot from Pat's Halloween class*

Pat's experience granted her license to create her own routines – meaning my wonderful experience was thanks to her own creativity and level of expertise. This was also confirmation that I had found a great person to teach me more about Nia!

What follows is an adaptation of our interview. My questions are in bold and Pat's responses follow in my best reconstruction of her own words. An additional note from my later research is in italics. Any errors are my own.

### **What is Nia, in your own words?**

It's a fusion exercise. In other words, we draw from more than one discipline – actually from nine movement disciplines: three from the martial arts, three from the healing arts, and three from dancing. It was founded in the 1980s by a couple of aerobics instructors who were tired out from all the high-impact aerobics work. They wanted to come up with something that would be a good workout but would be easy on the joints.

One of the reasons why all of these different disciplines were selected was so that it wouldn't be all the assertive hard driving energy for example of tae kwon do – each discipline has a different energy or movement. We're not here to pound the you-know-what out of our bodies!

*Note: The founders' (Debbie Rosas and Carlos AyaRosas) original acronym was Non-Impact Aerobics. However, Pat and many others define it now as Neuromuscular Integrative Action. The nine disciplines are: tai chi, tae kwon do, aikido, jazz dance, modern dance, Duncan dance, yoga, Alexander technique, and Feldenkrais technique, and there are 52 steps or moves that make up the class choreographies.*

**To be honest I was pretty surprised by how much I managed to sweat in your class. I liked that it was really accessible for people regardless of their fitness level, but it was easy for me to scale it up to challenge myself.**

Nia is all about being mindfully aware of what you are doing, how you are doing it, and what you need to do to make it work for you. There are people who are not aware of their bodies or how they are moving. I tell my students, "Consider what you're doing. Does this feel right?"

I always tell beginners to keep it small, keep it simple. Focus on the feet and the arms will come later. And Nia is nonjudgmental and noncompetitive, so it meets you where

you are!

**Looking back on your class I attended, I think I can identify some elements from tae kwon do, tai chi, jazz, modern, and yoga. Do different classes focus on different disciplines? How do you teach the different techniques?**

In each class, all nine disciplines are represented. It may not be obvious in that class, but at least the spirit of each discipline is there. For example, maybe in one class there won't be any blocks or kicks from tae kwon do, but there will be focus and precision. Maybe we won't use any jazz steps, but we will do something electric or volatile.

I'm a stickler for the integrity of the technique, especially in the martial arts. I did a class the other day where we spent time going over blocks and kicks. Sometimes I spend a whole week on one discipline. For example on modern dance, which is all about shapes and space, and being in balance or off balance.

We have what we call "Form" which is the prescribed choreography and "Freedom" which is the ability to let go and give yourself permission to dance around the room without worrying about technique. I combine both elements in each class.

**I did love the sense of freedom and simple joy of movement I found in your class. Is that a strong emphasis in Nia?**

Yes, Nia is all about giving yourself permission to let go. I think about it like connecting to your inner child – playful, having a good time, unconcerned about what other people think or say.

It's about your own personal expression and about breaking old patterns, old habits. There are five sensations we incorporate: flexibility, stability, strength, agility, and mobility.

It's certainly not about how you look or about losing weight (although some people do lose weight). It's about accepting yourself as you are, embracing every aspect of your being. For me that meant giving myself permission to let go, not to be quite so rigid in my movement quality, and not worrying about how it looked.

Nia meets you where you are, and it draws you in, and it takes you on a journey.

**I certainly felt like I was going on a journey when you took us through that meditation at the end of class. Is that usual for Nia?**



I probably have a much more spiritual end to the class than a lot of people. Some instructors end when the music ends, when the energetic part of the class ends. There may be some stretches and then they leave. I like the idea of coming into the gathering circle, to connect with the other people in the class before we all go out. People in my class seem to respond to it.

I don't always do the same thing, though. Sometimes I do a reading, or sometimes we do a moving meditation. I'll put music on and say "OK, this is the Feldenkrais technique," or "Let's move through some aikido movement."

#### **Who would you say Nia is right for? Why would you encourage people to try it?**

Nia is for everybody. In Nia we have an expression: "Through movement, we find health." And people with different abilities can do it. I have an autistic student who comes right up front. He doesn't move a lot, but he loves the music and movement.

When I started doing Nia, it was like for that one hour, no matter what was going on in my life, I could put everything on the back burner and have a good time. At the end I felt such a sense of accomplishment: I had done something good for myself physically, mentally, and emotionally.

In 2000 my husband died of pancreatic cancer. Nia was a lifeline for me. My classes gave me a reason to get up in the morning, to put one foot in front of the other. Nia has really helped me tremendously over the years to accept his death and to accept other changes in my life.

I think it's like chocolate – you need to try to see if you like it. And then you won't be able to put it down!

(<https://nianow.com/geofind/classes>)

**I agree! And I hope many people in the social dancing community will give Nia a try.**



You can head to the Nia website(<https://nianow.com/geofind/classes>) to search for a class near you.

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