



• writer Tracey Fenner

# discovering NIA

A dancer since the age of three, Tracey Fenner explored many movement forms before finding her calling as a Nia instructor. She tells us about her journey into soulful movement...

Dancing has been part of my life since I was a little girl. In fact, I can't remember a day as a child when I wasn't hopping and skipping somewhere. By eight I was attending my local dance school every night taking ballet, jazz, modern and tap dancing lessons and spent weekends sitting dance exams, rehearsing for shows and participating in national dance competitions. At 16 I auditioned for one of 30 places at the Northern Ballet School in Manchester and after being accepted, left home and spent the next three years in intensive training full-time to prepare for a career in the competitive world of show business. After graduation I danced professionally for a number of years and eventually moved into teaching when I was 24.

In late 2006, after nearly a decade teaching modern dance, ballet, jazz and tap in Dubai, I stumbled over an article about a dance form called 'Nia' while reading a health magazine. I was fascinated by the blend of diverse movement forms the article described and was intrigued to learn more. At the time I was searching for something different to the traditional forms of dance I had been practicing for years; a holistic movement practice that was gentler on my body.



I have always enjoyed the stillness of yoga, yet the dancer inside me needs and craves more movement choices. I felt a strong desire to follow not just a physical, but also mental, emotional and spiritual path and Nia seemed like a natural progression from the world of dance into a new realm of holistic fitness.

At the time there were no Nia classes available in Dubai so I sent off to Nia headquarters in the US for the DVD so that I could at least see what it was all about. I remember sitting down to watch it for the first time and knew instantly that this was something I wanted to explore more.

Around this time, my husband and I relocated to the UK and soon after we settled I saw an ad for a Nia white belt intensive training course hosted by American black belt master, Helen Terry. This coincidental timing was perfect. I signed up despite the fact that everyone thought I was a little crazy. Considering the fact that I hadn't even taken one Nia class at this point, they may have been right, but somehow I instinctively knew I had to do it. I remember showing up for the introduction evening feeling very nervous but as I sat listening and absorbing every word Helen spoke, I began to relax. I had a strange feeling. I felt very safe, comfortable, 'at home'. My Nia journey had begun.

As soon as we started to dance, I felt at ease in my body. As a professional dancer, I had been trained for years to have every movement in the right place on the exact beat of the music, not even an eyelash out of place, but with Nia I was invited to experiment with movement and form in new ways. The choreography felt amazing and as the class continued, I felt a deep sense of joy overcome me as I freed my body and expanded my mind to the endless possibilities of movement. The experience of breaking old dance habits was totally liberating and I felt truly alive in my body.

For the first time in my dancing career I focused on listening to what my body needed in every moment so that it felt comfortable, rather than trying to perform challenging movements that didn't feel good. This heightened sense of awareness allowed me to consciously listen to the

sensations in my body and move it accordingly. The result was a feeling that every cell in my being was smiling in response. I was so excited and energised I wanted to burst, and I remember thinking to myself, "If I can feel this great – physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually – after one class, how am I going to feel by the end of the week?" I was hooked.

From the very first moment I started Nia, I found it challenging to find a way to describe it. Like Tao, it cannot be defined in a single word, phrase, way of thinking or perception because it is a mix of so many dance forms, and is always evolving and changing. Furthermore, it uniquely touches each and every person who experiences it in a different way. One thing is certain: Nia uses music, movement and magic as medicine for the body, mind and spirit.

When I first started teaching Nia there were only around 100 Nia instructors in the whole of the UK. I remember my first class was pretty much a disaster and a huge learning curve. I felt extremely nervous because despite the fact that I had taught dance for many years, the Nia 'language' was still unfamiliar to me. Music is a huge part of the Nia experience, yet in that first class, the sound system kept cutting out. I had remembered the moves by the musical cues so had to remember the choreography without the help of music. As a true dance professional, I carried on and I am happy to say everyone came back the next week.

I went on to teach Nia in many different studios in the UK and eventually became a fitness presenter for the exclusive Champsneys Springs Health & Spa Resort in Leicestershire, where I offered Nia fitness weekend breaks. The longer I taught Nia, the more my confidence grew and the more I connected to my body; this enabled me to not only deepen my personal practice, but to express myself and the Nia philosophy to students in every class.

My most recent Nia experience was when I visited Kamalaya, Thailand's award winning Wellness Sanctuary and Holistic Spa Resort. Dancing Nia in such a sacred and special environment was incredible and I felt a connection to space and the vastness of



THIS PAGE: (Clockwise from top left) Tracey dancing beach-side at Kamalaya; Nia founders Debbie Rosas Stewart and Carlos Aya Rosas. OPPOSITE PAGE: (Clockwise from top left) Nia dance classes in-action, all courtesy of [www.fotofu.co.uk](http://www.fotofu.co.uk). OPENING PAGES: Tracey Fenner courtesy of [www.fotofu.co.uk](http://www.fotofu.co.uk)

### what is nia?

Nia is an expressive body-mind movement and lifestyle practice, integrating fitness and health. It creatively blends movements, concepts and philosophies from both Eastern and Western traditions. Nia uses "The Body's Way" to achieve physical, mental, emotional and spiritual fitness and wellbeing. The Nia Technique was created by two truly inspirational and exceptional souls, Debbie Rosas Stewart and Carlos Aya Rosas, and has been established for over 26 years with 100,000 students being taught by more than 2,500 licensed teachers in 42 countries worldwide.

Nia is personal, a sensation that can only be felt. Founded on the concept that there is a dancer, martial artist, and highly aware person within each person, this neuromuscular integrative action melds various concepts together. It has seen 26 years of advancement and is the first and most advanced form of fusion fitness. Combining classic movement forms, it encompasses three arts: martial, healing, and dance, to create a synergy unmatched by any isolated technique. Revolutionising the world of fitness and well being, it replaces punishment with pleasure and advocates doing things the easy way. Nia builds internal and external strength including strengthening bones, joints, muscles and breathing, cardiovascular conditioning, improved muscle tone, flexibility, weight management, relaxation and stress reduction. Nia is to exercise what holistic medicine is to healthcare. Through movement we find health.

By embracing the gifts of the healing arts, we embody sensation, the backdrop upon which all of our practice takes place. Martial arts and meditative techniques teach mindfulness, a powerful tool for self-discovery. Dance techniques teach how to move with grace and fluidity, and integrative body therapies help us understand how to self-heal through awareness and alignment that improves functioning. Various psychological tools support the self-guided process, allowing students to become self-empowered and to take charge of their own growth and wellbeing – a transformational experience in and of itself. Nia Technique, Inc. is a recognised leader in the field of body-mind-spirit fitness training.

Nia blends nine movement forms taking the energy essence of each. The nine forms are: Martial Arts (Tai Chi, Tae Kwon Do, Aikido); Dance Arts (Jazz, Duncan, Modern) and Healing Arts (Yoga, Feldenkrais, the Alexander Technique). Playing with these forms helps to unblock impediments of energy flow in the body. In Systemic Movement, Nia opens up to moving as a unit and increases your sensitivity to moving as a whole. Creating awareness within how you connect parts, energetically connecting limbs to the core, spine and breath.

the environment around me in a way I never have before. Being in touch with nature and open to the elements – the sights, smells and sounds of Koh Samui – while dancing Nia, was a moving and unforgettable experience.

Since my first white belt training in 2007 I have continued to progress up through the Nia belt system, from white, to green to blue belt. Between each belt there is a 13-month practice period that is aided by Nia's mentoring programme. I am currently the only certified Nia blue belt instructor in Hong Kong (where I moved in 2009), and my personal goal is to build awareness for Nia in Hong Kong and around Asia. I would like to achieve my brown and black belts over the next few years, and ultimately, I'd like to become a Nia trainer.

Dancing and teaching Nia has changed my life. This beautiful dance form holds such a special place in my heart and through its practice I feel as though I've found my true path and 'calling'. I feel truly blessed to be able to do something that I love and feel passionate about every day and am continually inspired to deepen my practice; to be a better teacher and person, and to go out into the community and make positive and openhearted connections with likeminded souls. Nia has done more than change the way I move on the dance floor, it has taught me to dance with life.

[www.niahongkong.com](http://www.niahongkong.com)