



the healing power of dance

writer Insiya Rasiwala-Finn

Universal among movement practices, dance is probably one of the most ancient, diverse as well as most lyrical ways through which humans have expressed ourselves.

The beauty of dance animating ceremonies and celebrations was pivotal in the telling of myths. In other forms, it prepared our ancestors for battle through tribal warrior dances and song which put groups into “a battle trance, a specific altered state of consciousness,” says evolutionary musicologist Joseph Jordania.

While our ancestors may have known that dance and rhythmic movement can impact our mental and emotional states, it seems to have taken the larger human collective much longer to realise the potential of dance in impacting our consciousness.

Dancers have known for centuries, that from gesture and physical movement arises a

deeper insight into our emotional and mental states. Think about the heightened euphoria, followed by calm you have felt after dancing at a crowded summer music festival, or in the anonymity of a nightclub moving your body in rhythm with so many others. Dancing in a group is a part of our collective history and if you have ever watched or participated in traditional dances from different cultures, such as African dance, or capoeira from Brazil, you have felt that connection.

Says Joanna MacKenzie-Enga, a former professional dancer and trained Dance (Movement) Therapist, “there is a ripening of our bodily awareness through dance and rhythmic movement that leads to an innate

cellular awareness. The more aware we are of ourselves, the more awareness we bring to our everyday lives, opening us up to our own healing.”

“To dance is to live,” said Isadora Duncan, an American dancer who died in 1927 and is considered by many to be the creator of modern dance. With her fresh insights and energy, Duncan brought to dance, which, by the late 1800s had become the isolated “high art” of ballet and elaborate ballroom dances, the sensibility of being connected to our everyday lives.

This freedom of inspiring life into dance encouraged the blossoming of contemporary dance movements, with noted dancers such

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as Martha Graham and later Pina Bausch leading the way to both a different way of moving, as well as reinventing what the purpose of dance really is. Dedicated and articulate, Graham spoke of a “vitality, a life force” that is present in an artist and is unique to that artist/dancer, that cannot and should not be blocked.

This life-force is akin to the idea of ‘prana’ or ‘qi’, ‘life-force’ in the eastern traditions and it is in Graham’s work that one can begin to see the connection between dance in the West as an extension of physical movement and as something that transcends movement and connects body and mind in a deeper way.

Clearly this idea had always existed in older eastern and traditional cultures. ‘Sufi’ dance or ‘Sufi’ whirling, is known as a form of ‘sama’ or physically active meditation which originated among ‘Sufis’, and is still practiced by the dervishes of the ‘Mevlevi’ order. Through the dance, performed within

a ritualistic worship ceremony, the whirling dervishes seek to abandon their egos or personal desires through the act of listening to the music, focusing on God and spinning their bodies in continuous, repetitive circles. It is a sacred dance, and the ‘Sufis’ speak of being turned by something other than themselves. It is in their opening up to the spirit, they call it the universal love of God, that they are able to whirl for hours at a time, without experiencing any physical fatigue. It’s a clear description of that trance state, or state of altered consciousness. The poems of Rumi, the famous ‘Sufi’ mystic, describe the dance.

Fast forward to the world of western dance in the 1940s, where we begin to see clearer recognition that dance has the ability to impact more than our physical bodies and musculature. “Sometimes dancing made you feel happy and joyful, while at other times, you felt your buttons being pushed as you went deeper, just

as they do in meditation. Things started to come up and begged the question... what’s happening, what’s uncoiling?” says MacKenzie-Enga.

DANCE MOVEMENT THERAPY

These questions sowed the seeds for Dance Therapy or Dance Movement Therapy (DMT), which used movement and dance for emotional, cognitive, social, behavioural and physical conditions. The goal for DMT therapists is to find a healthy balance and sense of wholeness, and emerged from the idea that movement and emotion are directly related. “More bodily awareness creates more emotional intelligence,” explains MacKenzie-Enga.

Dance therapists are trying to teach more emotional intelligence, which decreases stress in the body, allows for more feedback from sensations in the body and enables the patient to make decisions based on bodily feedback. This creates new patterns of behaviour that can override old, harmful ways of being and acting.

Sound plausible? Most ancient cultures would have agreed with DMT as they were more closely connected to the rhythms of nature. Distortions, according to DMT practitioners occur when we unconsciously block the harmonic resonance of energy in our body, be it through emotional trauma or physical injury. Mindful dance and movement can become an integrated way to heal from these blockages.

If you’ve ever watched a newborn baby move its limbs, you have observed the power of intrinsic, authentic movement, the natural exploration of our self in relation to the space around.

Like yoga, Tai Chi and other movement practices, dance is a potent and healing movement meditation, allowing us to access wellness by connecting to our body-mind continuum. The flowering of dance styles today, loosely grouped under the umbrella “conscious dance” bear testimony to this. Here’s a brief summary of some of the most interesting and powerful conscious dance practices and where to access them.

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DYNAMIC MEDITATION BY OSHO

Probably one of the first forms of movement meditation that was introduced as a method, the late charismatic guru Osho’s dynamic meditation utilised the same principles we see in conscious dance. That in order to release energy blockages in the body, we have to do the same for the mind and emotions. Following a five step process that begins with a vigorous breath, moves into what is similar to an embodiment practice, where you allow sensations to arise in your body, follow them and release them through a completely uninhibited form of movement and sound – crying, laughing, screaming, and all is ok here. Next you chant a mantra from deep in your lower abdomen, after which you stand for 15 minutes in complete stillness. At the culmination of the meditation, you are free to move once again, this time in celebration of the release you undoubtedly feel.

NIA

Founded in 1983 by two former aerobics instructors Debbie Rosas and Carlos Aya Rosas, who disagreed with the “no pain, no gain” mantra that was *de rigeur* in the fitness

world, Nia, short for non-impact aerobics is an expressive body-mind movement and lifestyle practice that marries the powerful movements of martial arts such as Tai Chi, Aikido and Taekwondo; the benefits of healing practices such as yoga, Feldenkreis and Alexander Technique, and the lyrical rhythm of dance such as modern and Jazz ballet to create an integrative, powerful and joyful way of moving and being.

Professional dancer Tracey Fenner discovered Nia while seeking a movement practice that was more spiritual and less intense on her body after dancing classical ballet for 30 years. Yoga and Tai Chi didn’t connect to her inner dancer. Nia did. Today, Fenner, the founder of Nia Hongkong finds its impact to be transformational and liberating for her body and her life.

“As a dancer I thought I was aware of my body but since dancing Nia I have discovered that was not the case. Nia empowers me to make choices for myself moment to moment and to guide others to discover for themselves the many benefits in a more pleasurable way.”

She is also effusive about Nia’s healing and grounding benefits. “I believe feeling is healing, when I dance I am in my body and this results in moving in a gentler way, nurturing my ‘self’, directing energy within

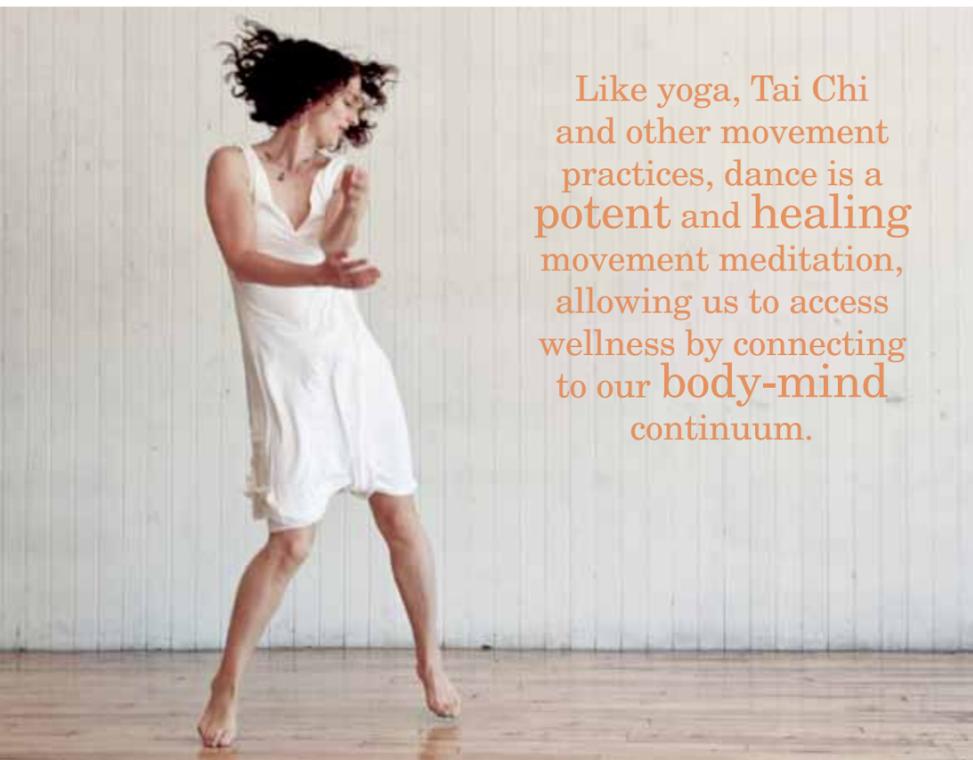
myself and enhancing my relationship with my body towards finding better health, greater wellbeing, inner growth and greatness.”

Part of a global phenomenon, Fenner is one of 2800 Nia teachers, offering classes in 45 different countries. Most classes are an hour long and offer a unique combination of 52 moves that correspond with the main areas of the body: the base, the core and the upper extremities. Inclusive and welcoming, you can join in as a Nia neophyte and follow along to your own ability.

5 RHYTHMS

“A school of moving meditation and ecstatic dance” is how dancer, author and musician Gabrielle Roth describes 5 Rhythms, a practice she founded in the late 1980s at spiritual, healing centre Esalen in Northern California. Born from the idea that all life is energy, that energy moves in waves, waves in patterns, patterns in rhythms and that a human being is a confluence of all these; Roth created 5 Rhythms. It’s a potent practice, one that allows us to both view life and how we inhabit our lives as an extension of dynamic energy. It’s also inspired many other sacred dance forms.

Like light, sound or ocean waves, a dancing body when moving freely passes



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through five distinct rhythmic patterns, says Roth. These patterns continuously repeat themselves in a wave of motion. The 5 Rhythms are: 'Flowing': the fluid, feminine, grounded and receptive glide; 'Staccato': the percussive, pulsing beat that is more about doing, about finding our edges. 'Chaos': the rhythm of letting go, of surrendering into the wildness, the unknown; 'Lyrical': where we first begin to dissolve our self-consciousness and connect to our own uniqueness. This is the realm of creativity, of a blending of masculine and feminine energies, the place that art takes us to. Finally there is the fifth rhythm: 'Stillness'. Like 'savasana' (corpse pose) in yoga, stillness is the echo, the quiet emptiness, where gentle movements rise and fall, start and end, in a field of silence.

From the dance floors of Berlin nightclubs to an equally pulsing 5 Rhythms class at Esalen, Bettina Rothe's career took a different bend after her first encounter with Gabrielle Roth. The German psychology graduate gravitated to 5 Rhythms immediately. She felt that the practice offered a powerful way of bridging the world of the physical to that of the psyche and because it was a body and mind based practice, it offered healing and catharsis in a holistic way.

The rhythmic, global beats that Gabrielle Roth played also helped. Here was dance to music Rothe loved in a safe and embracing space. Today, Rothe lives in Vancouver, Canada, where she has facilitated the growth of a 5 Rhythms community over the last decade.

"It's powerful," notes Rothe, because "you work with yourself, wherever you come" into the dance. "Everything is and has a dance and the awakening happens, when we adapt our learnings from the dance into everyday life. It's also about learning to listen to what's going on inside of us, learning to follow and learning to lead in dance and in life."

If you're interested in a 5 Rhythms practice, a good access point is the "Sweat Your Prayers" drop in sessions, which offer minimal instruction, yet supervision by a trained instructor. With no steps to follow, no choreography to learn, no way to do it wrong or right, just a simple body and breath



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~Gabrielle Roth

connection, this is a practice waiting to be discovered.

SOUL MOTION

Vinn Marti returned from the Vietnam war at the age of 26, with a goal to study early childhood education. A chance encounter with a Jazz dance class at his college (to fulfill a physical education requirement), however, threw Marti into a tailspin.

"I remembered a mystical experience I had, when I was four years old watching a dance performance," he recalls. "It was a kinesthetic, psychic response to the beauty of the movement."

The (metaphorical) duck back in the water, Marti plunged into the world of dance, taking pleasure in the strength and

joy of physical movement, yet also seeking something more. After years of professional dance and choreography, and yoga practice, Marti evolved his body of work into Soul Motion. In a vein similar to 5 Rhythms, Soul Motion views dance as a gateway to the divine, to the sacred. While 5 Rhythms talks about the waves or movement patterns, Marti describes his version of conscious dance as the dance of relational landscapes.

There are four landscapes, i.e. the first one, he calls Dance Intimate, where we move alone. This is the starting point, says Marti, of becoming at ease in our own bodies, it is about internal space, i.e. the space behind the eyes. The second is Dance Communion, where we move with one other, Dance Community, where we move with everyone and Dance Infinity, where we move our practice to the everyday, a sphere that Marti says allows the dance to become a daily, life practice.

Soul Motion, like many other conscious dance are open to all levels of students, from couch potatoes to professional dancers. It is a welcome, healing space, where you follow a specific series of movements, some choreographed, some free form yet with guidance. The biggest takeaway, "the power of the pause," says Marti, by moving through a Soul Motion exercise, where he teaches dancers how to take a moment,

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become aware of their breath and spirit and then initiate movement. "The quality of 'savasana' (corpse pose) is present throughout," he smiles with meditative contemplation.

SCHOOL OF MOVEMENT MEDICINE

At the heart of the School of Movement Medicine is the belief that anybody and everybody has the power to transform suffering into wisdom, creativity, light and possibility. Sound inspiring? It is. Founded by UK based couple Susannah Darling Khan and Ya'Acov Darling Khan, who apprenticed for 18 years with Gabrielle Roth, as well as studied and apprenticed with shamans, healers and teachers from around the world, Movement Medicine begins with the grounding of dance, yet leads you on an intimate journey of mind-body exploration. Given Susannah Darling Khan's training in both dance as well as Gestalt Psychotherapy, it is not surprising that the work is concerned with better understanding our psyche yet the process is grounded in the physical world.

Using a medicine wheel as the focus for Movement Medicine, the outer spokes of the wheel connect to the four elements. Earth is grounding, fire transformative, water, the creative place where the masculine energy of fire and the feminine energy of earth meet, encouraging creativity, while air denotes our link to the world of the spirit. "Being aware of our breath tunes us into life like nothing else," write the Darling Khans, "it is the basis of most meditation practices" and it is true of Movement Medicine as well.

When you begin the practice, it starts with freestyle movement classes, where you are free to move yet supported by a community in a conscious, aware space. The further you continue down the path of the work, you become more open to greater transformation and practices that encourage you to move fluidly through caring for yourself, your interpersonal relationships, your community, and the

divine, recognising your strengths and weaknesses in all these areas.

The ultimate goal? To connect to the centrepiece of the medicine wheel, to what the Darling Khans call the fifth element, that they describe as love, but also as silence, the void and emptiness from which all manifestation arises and to which it returns. It is the space in our lives, the place of rest and of all potential. And committing to a conscious movement practice like Movement Medicine is one way of getting there.

MOVING VENTURES

Charismatic wise woman, Ellen Watson has been on staff at Esalen Institute, for more than 25 years, where she studies, practices, and teaches various modalities of moving meditation. Ellen is a teacher of Esalen® Massage, Gabrielle Roth's 5Rhythms™, Holotropic™ Breathwork, SpiritDance, The Art of Essential Touch, and Your Body is a Musical Instrument.

From 1984 through 2003, Ellen developed and administered the Movement Arts Program at Esalen. In 1996, she founded

MovingVentures™ School, whose mission is education in the somatic arts, focusing on women and men in developing countries, and the southern USA. MovingVentures™ faculty offer workshops, retreats, and trainings at Esalen, in Bali, and at other inspiring locations around the globe. 🌿

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Dancers twirling at Dynamic Meditation By Osho.