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Tango: A Deeper Look

By Sharna Fabiano

One of the incredible things about tango is that it is so multi-dimensional: art, hedonism, competitiveness, healing. Its all there.

– Daniel Trenner
Tango Maestro and Revivalist,
Northampton, Massachusetts

Tango is a strange beast. Its intimate embrace and intertwining legwork prove as irresistible for some as they are intimidating for others. Erotic images typify the portrayal of tango in popular media, but curiously, experienced social dancers tend to liken what they do to mind-body practices like yoga or martial arts, highlighting experiences of connection and creative flow.

What is it about tango that cannot be perceived from the outside? It would seem that this dance, while being sensual, romantic, and intimate, also demands a great deal of focus and discipline. Devotees the world over have left their jobs, emptied their living rooms, and changed their wardrobes to study and dance tango. On the other hand, many try tango once and never return, citing it as “too difficult,” a judgment rarely made of other partner dances.

Michael Autrey, a freelance writer in Portland, Oregon, draws a comparison between tango and yoga as experiences that must be felt rather than seen:

When it comes to tango and yoga, a picture - or video - is not worth a thousand words... Close-embrace social tango does not make for telling images; nor does meditation. Why? ... [In tango and yoga,] the principal sense is touch... Dancing, one is 'in touch' with the floor, one's partner, the music: the whole, greater than the sum of its parts, is touching in every sense of the word.

The touch of the foot on the floor or the arm on the back, even the 'touch' of musical sound waves on the inner ear brings our focus into the sensory realm. By cultivating our natural proprioceptive abilities (sense of the position of the body), tango can give us the feeling that *we are one with what we touch*. If tango is defined by this connective sensation, rather than specific shapes or steps, it's easier to understand why its essential qualities are invisible. You have to 'do it' with your body in order to 'get it' with your brain.

And what is it that tango dancers 'do?' There are as many styles of tango as there are dancers, and much debate over the correct technique, or the use of a 'technique' at all. On a sensory level, the word *tango* is like the Japanese word *ma*, roughly translated as *the space that gives form to*

the shape, such as the space inside a bowl. It is neither the steps nor the rhythms that define tango, but rather the unique embrace of each couple, the private world that two partners create together. During one of my rehearsals, a [Laban REFERENCE] movement analyst observed: “The tango form is expressed by the creation of a container.”

What is the “embrace?” What does the container hold?

Instructors spend the majority of their efforts attempting to convey this elusive yet essential aspect of tango, describing in minute detail various sensations of pressure in the arms and torso, or careful weight – shifting from one foot to the other. Ultimately, the refined proprioceptive skill of the dancer places mechanical positioning in the service of sensory attunement. In other words, the right shape for a tango embrace is any shape that creates the feeling of 'connection' for the couple.

A successful tango connection, regardless of style or musical interpretation, is one in which information flows back and forth, replacing the perception of two with the awareness of one. Dancers speak of shared balance and even a shared mind. The figurative 'four legs and one body' is a favorite way to describe the tango couple. It is in this experience of connection with the other where we discover the transformational side of tango as a practice, as more than simply a leisure activity. In my conversations about tango with a variety of healing practitioners, I encountered many direct parallels. For instance, Donna Waks, a Craniosacral Therapist in Washington, DC, observes:

Surrendering to the tango embrace allows the space between two separate entities to support a dynamic and creative relationship. Similarly, in the subtle work of craniosacral therapy, paying attention to the 'relational field' establishes safety and trust, and allows for an open flow of communication... As in a tango partnership, the practitioner/client dyad is no longer aware of separateness between forms, but only of the more pervasive field of potential and creative forces.

There is plenty of fun to be had in tango, but also a considerable amount of physical and emotional difficulty. In both learning the dance form and experiencing it socially, our deeply rooted assumptions about beauty, worth and power tend to rise to the surface. Even so, I believe tango can be compared to partnered healing modalities that guide us through similarly murky waters in the broader context of our lives.

Tantra, Thai Massage, shiatsu, and Reiki are examples of healing practices in which two people are necessary, and both giver and receiver benefit. This connection is also available in tango, and is most commonly associated with male and female partners, but is not necessarily that. The closed loop of the embrace of any two people has a metaphysical quality that is comparable to the experience of the individual that lets go and connects with the universe.

– Daniel Trenner

Practical Wisdom from Tango

In addition to discovering a creative field of shared space, tango students are often encouraged to use their 'embrace' to deliberately transmit trust, reliability, enthusiasm, confidence, and support to their partners. In this way, the study and practice of tango offers dancers the opportunity to learn inspiring communication skills that may be transferred to other contexts, whether verbally in conversation or non-verbally by other means:

Tango offers a unique place to find out about our presence, about how to communicate clearly without dominating, and about how to follow actively, without losing our own power. These are qualities that we need in our everyday life, especially if our work brings us into close contact with many people. Besides being fun, Tango can provide a 'playground' to sharpen our awareness and to practice our skills of interaction.

– Ruth Zimmerman
Tango Instructor, Devon, England

One student of mine likes to joke: “Just close your eyes in a tango class, and you are in couples therapy.” Joking aside, who among us does not want to support our lover or friend to feel more confident, creative, and balanced? Who among us does not wish we could help our co-workers to be more productive, relaxed, and successful? For those who want to learn, tango offers the chance to 'test drive' these interpersonal skills in the creative environments of the classroom and the *milonga*, or tango dance event. We gain more understanding and therefore control over what our own bodies communicate and the effect of that communication on others.

We don't always think about what we project to others through something as simple as our posture, let alone a tango embrace, but there is a saying in Buenos Aires, the natal city of tango: “You know everything about your partner before you take the first step.” [This reflects the culture of tango, which can be as much about attitude, or intention, as it is about actual dancing. *Portenos*, or residents of Buenos Aires, are famous for scoping each other out, sometimes for hours, before making eye contact to initiate a dance. Further, exceptional male dancers are traditionally described as 'well stood,' such is the importance given to body language:

Dance is unspoken communication and can be even more profound than language. The simple act of standing shares a glimpse of what we have to give, what we exude to define our presence, what we let go of to be receptive. The tango embrace is a representation of who we are and what we communicate in every moment.

– Faith Green
Interdisciplinary Alignment Specialist
Washington, DC

Tango is improvised one step at a time, so both partners must remain attentive, responding to one another continuously. Dancers adjust the embrace as needed to keep the channel of communication open, allowing every step to serve the spatial and musical unfolding of the dance. When I become aware of my body language and intentions off the dance floor, a similar phenomenon occurs. I find my verbal conversations are more engaging, honest, and interesting. I make clearer decisions about whom I work or socialize with, and with whom I do not. I accept that I will gravitate naturally toward some and away from others, just as I know I will dance with some partners and not others at the milonga.

Personally, through dancing tango I've become less judgmental and less afraid of judgment. I've come to understand that everyone, including me, has a unique and valid perspective and that all perspectives can simultaneously exist in life, just as an infinite number of tango styles flow harmoniously on a single dance floor. In the tango couple, there is no wrong. There is only a greater or lesser degree of clarity. In conversations in any arena, from the dinner table to parliamentary debate, I believe this to be true as well.

Given the enhanced ability to respond collaboratively to each partner, a tango dancer can also acquire the skill of seeing from another's perspective, and adjusting his or her own dance to be

complimentary, even if only for a single three-minute tango. Translating these lessons of fluid communication into other contexts may simply require a commitment to practice, just like dancing.

Learning Wholeness from the Tango Partnership

In the process of careful and deliberate communication between two experienced dancers, sentiments like “I feel connected,” “I can express myself,” and even “I am complete” frequently emerge. Whether feeling connected to the partner, the dance floor, or the larger tango community, I think this language describes an experience of wholeness, and wholeness can be a powerful shift in awareness.

The power of the tango experience is its ability to be analogous. Creating wholeness in a duet makes more accessible the possibility of creating wholeness in oneself.

– Daniel Trenner

The perspective of wholeness reminds me that I am not lacking or insufficient, that there's nothing 'wrong' with me. As a human being, I deserve love and respect, and so does everyone else. This self-acceptance on the dance floor has brought a great deal of ease and calm into both my work and my personal relationships, and I believe a deep exploration of the tango's lead and follow roles can make this feeling real and tangible.

For women in particular, who are typically in the majority in the milonga, learning both the lead and follow parts can transform a perspective of lack (not enough men to go around) into a perspective of abundance (potential partnership with every person in the room). Along with the opportunity to dance more frequently, learning both roles can also deepen one's enjoyment and appreciation of the tango form, boosting skill, self-confidence, and creativity in the process:

Dancing both roles has made me a better dancer. When following, I listen more closely to the leader and am more engaged in the dance, quiet and present. As a leader, I am more connected to the music and to the follower, and I'm aware of moving from my center. If I'm having a night where I'm sitting a lot, I change my shoes and enjoy all the great followers in the room. The evening is enjoyable either way. Leading and following are just different expressions of myself as a dancer.

– Laurie Ann Greenberg
Thai Massage Therapist
Portland, Oregon

I like to remember that the words *lead* and *follow* are a translation of one single Spanish word: *improvise*, and merely serve as our modern descriptions of what were traditionally male and female roles. With lead and follow come other opposites that we can learn from, such as assertive and receptive, speak and listen, and even masculine and feminine - not only in the sense of social stereotyping, but in reference to the inner qualities of our right and left brain processes.

But no healthy individual, in life, expresses only one of these opposite qualities. We all have access to both all the time as we improvise our lives from moment to moment. Still, managing the opposing energies within us is a valuable life skill. It's nice to know when to work hard and when to rest, when to speak up and when to wait and see. And so, a word of caution to those who would interpret the tango as a chance to simply slide to one extreme or the other: we can't always work hard, and we can't always rest. The deep lesson of tango is not found in the opposing energies themselves, but in their balance.

This does not mean that we all need to dance both roles, although I do believe that is an extremely useful practice. The greater task, and the way I believe we reach for more profound depth and richness both in dance and in life, is to balance both assertive and receptive energies within the individual dancer. In fact, the balancing of opposing energies within us may even be necessary to attain great skill in social tango. Whether we name them *speaking* and *listening*, *masculine* and *feminine*, or *lead* and *follow* is not so important.

As the tango unfolds, it becomes clear that neither partner can be *only* assertive or *only* receptive and dance well; one cannot be only part, one must be whole. In other words, the leader is also following, and the follower also leading. Women who are too passive are considered tentative or unresponsive. One Argentine instructor I met in Buenos Aires was fond of warning his female students: "Do not turn the dance floor into a *muebleria* (furniture store)!" Inattentive men are likewise considered rough and unclear. But when each partner embodies both energies in the dance, regardless of gender role, not only do we dance better, but we also have a marvelous opportunity to become consciously aware of our innate wholeness as human beings.

For example, the female tango dancer, while receptive to her partner's signals, must simultaneously be assertive with each step that she takes. Likewise, the male tango dancer cannot be assertive in guiding his partner if he is not also receptive to how her body is moving in each moment. In Argentine Spanish, the language is clearer. They say in Buenos Aires that the man "invites" her (assertive) and she "trusts" him (receptive), but also that the woman then "takes" the step (assertive) and the man "receives" it (receptive). The chivalrous opening of the door is a great metaphor for tango, and illustrates the balanced circle of assertive and receptive energies nicely: The man opens the door, but then waits. The woman waits, and then walks through.

I suspect this to be one explanation for the tango's transformative power. Dancing well encourages us to behave physically as whole beings, even if we aren't aware of it. But, peeling back the screen of the body-mind tango connection offers the chance to experience even greater joy. I imagine dance gatherings in which we do not search for someone else to satisfy our desire for wholeness or worth, but rather celebrate our innate completeness with the entire community. I wish for dancers to then carry this appreciation for themselves and others off the dance floor and into the world, bringing inspiration into the countless other human interactions that fill each day.

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Sharna Fabiano has a background of classical and contemporary dance and began her study of the Argentine Tango in 1997. She has had the privilege to train and collaborate with many of the most accomplished tango artists and teachers of our time, including Daniel Trenner, Rebecca Shulman, Brigitta Winkler, Pablo Veron, Omar Vega, Pablo Pugliese, Javier Rochwarger, Mariano "Chicho" Frumboli, and many others. Her work in tango is informed by her ongoing yoga practice and her exploration of a variety of dance forms.

Sharna has been invited to teach and perform tango throughout North America and Europe, and in Havana, Cuba as part of US-licensed cultural exchange. In Washington, DC, she is founder and Executive Director of Tango Mercurio, a nonprofit organization presenting tango as an agent of social development. Her performing ensemble, Sharna Fabiano Tango Company, explores the evocative territory between tango and contemporary dance.
www.tangomercurio.org



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