



Tango and Internal Mindfulness

or

A Different Approach to Dancing Tango

by Tanja Thimm

➔ Higher, faster, better – even tango cannot escape from the competitive thinking of the majority. Always searching for the next kick, an even more refined gancho or another technically demanding turn, the ability to enjoy the act of dancing more than often falls by the wayside. Furthermore, the teaching of tango is most frequently coincidental, disorganized and often results in learning by imitation only. The tango teacher shows how to move the body and students will do their best to do it likewise, hereby generating an automated scheme of movement, thus producing a sense of emptiness. No doubt, perhaps technically superb, but somewhat lacking soul – such dancing couples make for a good show, are two high-performance sports dancers that won't touch anyone's heart as they themselves have missed to establish a close mental bond with the dance itself. Cool elegance, technical perfection and narcissistic autoerotic – all these aspects have hit miles away from the essence of tango. What else did we have? If you turn your view away from the competitive approach to tango and focus instead on the interior and the partner, the inner eye may be rewarded with: perception, emotions, respect, dialog and mindfulness. Read somewhere, heard about it, but no one there to ask for help - many of those trying to learn how to dance tango have surely encountered such situations.

A Diploma Thesis With Various Innovative Approaches

In her diploma thesis at the University of Hamburg, educator Ute Walter has examined the topic "Tango and Internal Mindfulness". Various innovative approaches to thinking were elaborated on in the work with the rather unwieldy title: "The Meaning of Internal Mindfulness in Tango Argentino and Its Teaching By Using Selected Aspects From the Method Dialog Process". From there, the author develops the principle of internal mindfulness against the backdrop of Western and Eastern ways of thinking and examines the applicability and analysis of the dialog process for the teaching and dancing of Tango Argentino. There are two central discursive paradigms:

- tango is heteronormatively fixed / constructed
- the act of dancing allows for an immediate perception of presence, a sense of here and now, some form of flowing
- tango implies meditative harmony, playful enjoyment of moving around, technical ability and erotically charged intimacy
- tango contributes to strategies for authentication / self-assurance, individualization and development of patterns of identity
- gender and sexual identities are in a state of flow

- communication constitutes the essence of tango, it is about creating and perceiving resonances, with empathy being an vital prerequisite
- psychic patterns and blockades are reflected in the way you dance, thus it is also always about the confrontation with your own fears and internal barriers
- bodily flexibility is linked to mental flexibility and vice versa
- internal mindfulness leads to the ability to enjoy dancing, something which can't be acquired by simply learning the movements by heart or producing choreographed figures, an emphasis on impressing the audience with one's skills or pursuing narcissistic self-projection

The author is seeking to develop an approach for a qualitatively different culture of communication. Ute Walter analyses thoroughly the method of the dialog process and provides means for its implementation in tango. The teaching of especially defined core abilities meant to methodically train the internal mindfulness make the dialog a teachable and learnable subject, and not any longer a piece of luck. The following aspects manifest the central skills of the dialog process method, whose observation and application throughout the teaching and learning process will improve the communication in dancing tango. Mindfulness forms the basis of these core aptitudes:

Open-mindedness, in this context, is the readiness to adjust to new ideas,

turnarounds and perspectives and question one's own positions. Without an open mind, you wouldn't be able to improvise in tango.

Radically paying respect is a lot more than being tolerant as you respond with particular sensitivity to the needs of your partner, which entails a high degree of empathy. It may stretch the identities of the roles held by each of the partners.

The *embodiment of the learner's attitude* is one that "cannot know", a constant return to an "unconsumed" bloody beginner's stance, which still has all the possibilities ahead, an adjustment to the "here and now".

Applied to tango, *productive pleading* means clearness and decidedness in leading, thus the provision of an intelligent and responsible conduct.

Letting your heart speak pleads to the authenticity in tango – dance by giving vent to your feelings.

Generative listening as an active engagement with the partner is a vital part of the body dialog in tango and is aimed at getting access to the emotional level of the respective partner.

The following bon mot is taken from the movie *Tango Lessons*: "If you want to be fast, keep it slow." Slowing down may facilitate mindfulness as it allows you to better concentrate on one sequence of movement and so make it easier to focus your perception on the immediate present.

Suspending assumptions and evaluations is to observe your own attitudes, question and possibly modify them. Fixed mental patterns are reflected in the act of dancing and may prevent from an open body dialog.

The assumption of an *explorative position* can be seen as some kind of researching learning process, an unconditional attentiveness towards both partner and music while maintaining a strong presence.

The *observation of the observer* eventually represents the taking up of a meta level, analyzing the perception of yourself and the other from a superordinate point of view.

Summarizing her work, the author argues for a more thorough integration of the field of perception into tango. Internal mindfulness, she contends, needed to be shifted towards the center of all teaching and learning efforts.

Ute Walter's aspirations for the didactics of tango and the students seem rather high. Strong meat for amateur dancers.

→ **In your work, you have formulated high demands for both teachers and students of tango. How realistic is it?**

Actually, it is something very down-to-earth and lifelike as it describes a fundamental dimension of human existence. Internal mindfulness enables us to perceive the wholeness of things and to stay in contact with our experiences, that is, in bodily, emotional, mental and spiritual ways. On the level of the body, our perception refers to the five senses, our ability to sense strain, temperature, pain, pressure and balance, etc. The physical senses register all sensations and pass them on to the brain, but only internal mindfulness allows us to make these perceptions part of our consciousness. Without this mindfulness, every perception would be purely mechanical, transient, lacking both vitality and presence. Besides the conscious perception, there is also a more subtle aspect, which is to be seen as a self-reflection: My personal sense of reality always depends on the way I perceive and the objects I focus my perception on. It reveals the manner in which I organize my subjective experiences. Are my thoughts currently involved in a judgment over something, a plan or memories? Am I presently in contact with my own experiences and the realization of my body, emotions and thoughts? The more my internal mindfulness is encompassing myself – the way I am at this time -, the more I will live in the here and now, be able to appear more present and discover the aspects of my self. However, it requires the ability to get in touch with your inner self and be aware of my current location at every point in time. Paradoxically, this is both difficult and easy. And it's exactly the same with dancing tango. Especially the experience of mindfulness is supposed to make the dancing of tango an exhilarating and enriching activity. This experience, after all, serves as a vital prerequisite for making the dance a real success.

→ **But is there anyone out there who would be able to make it?**

Sure, apart from its application to tango, this process is a lifelong journey. It relates more to a general emphasis on it and the question whether the awareness required for it can or need to be acquired in the course of the development of the dancing, or if it should have constituted a central platform from where to start the learning process as a mindful pervading acquisition. This would also suggest that an external reality will no longer be the only starting point for the learning process, in the form of an ideal that is to be internalized. Rather, your own reality becomes the point of departure for the learning process. Several exercises are to better develop this approach to tango and specifically train the dancer's perception, as described above, more focused.

→ **Which individual experiences did you make in implementing the approach in your courses?**

I integrate this approach into the teaching of my courses, but for dance students who seek to work with these aspects more intensely, I also offer, along with Marga Nagel, special workshops dealing with these topics. I notice that internal mindfulness helps both the participants of my courses and me to learn how to go beyond our fixed habits and accomplish a more satisfied dancing. Which means, in particular, to reach a state of common creative flowing, something which does not necessarily eliminate the great variety of forms. The conscious perception as such is a tool that allows for the detachedness and flexibility indispensable for improvisation, for mutual reference, being in the here and now, letting yourself move by the music and not waste your thoughts on the figure to come. Developing an internal mindfulness is absolutely imperative for the quality of communication and the required high degree of coordination between the dance partners. Thus, it is essential to find the instant where everything is "in the balance", so as to discover the process of waiting and listening as a key for both roles.

Ute Walter

➔ **Is there anyone who has inspired you in pursuing this work?**

Apart from my own experiences within and outside of tango, there are actually many sources of inspiration. In one of his last seminars Buenos Aires in 2004, Carlos Gavito summarized his philosophy of dance by contending: "El tango pasa entre paso y paso" – The decisions are made in between the steps. Moreover, the ability to express yourself is defined by the degree of self-perception. It is about taking your time, knowing what your feelings are. Where there is no consciousness, no knowledge about your own actions and emotions, the movements will not be grounded in a clear intention. Internal mindfulness may prove beneficial to the acquisition of movements. The observant repetition of movements allows for an even more sophisticated differentiation of these movements and may make them clearer, more efficient and natural. Beginners who are familiar with this concept are, as I have observed, equipped with a greater relaxation and calmness, which is frequently speeding up the learning process. Furthermore, they are well-prepared to find satisfaction in dancing right from the start. Advanced students are often amazed about how many layers and facets have, by then, escaped their conscious perception and how mindful perception has not only altered the way they dance.

➔ **Does a concept like internal mindfulness spill over to every-day life?**

Eventually, it is essential to employ mindfulness in our daily activities, to better bring it to mind. Because, after all, in becoming happy, we don't have anything more than this moment. And we are no longer required to live a monasterial life. The concept of internal mindfulness is derived from Buddhist traditions, which maintain clear instructions as to the exercises for cultivating it. Traditional methods for the training of internal mindfulness are usually relatively complex. They often manifest very unique techniques and are rather time-consuming. It must be noted at this point that it is not meant to escape into some sort of interiority; rather, a "facing-up" to internal obstacles that prevent us from turning towards other humans and reality. It is about an integral mode of living. Today there exist many ways for putting this integration into everyday life into the center of our attention. Zen master Tich Nah Tan is one of the more famous examples. I myself look back to several of years of training in meditative practices and the working on internal mindfulness at the Swiss teacher Annette Kaiser. This training is oriented towards the integral approaches of the Indian philosopher Sri Aurond and the U.S. philosopher Ken Wilber. The teaching of internal mindfulness in tango courses may, through the increased consciousness, have a positive impact on how you approach life. Thus, participants not only learn how to walk in a mindful manner, but also how to live a mindful and conscious every-day life.



Ute Walter showing a movement from Tai Chi

➔ **If our assumptions are based on constructions of reality, can there be any "truth" in tango?**

The word has spread, meanwhile, that there is no absolute truth, but only perspectives. We find it very hard, though, to completely comprehend this new paradigm, develop it into an inner attitude and integrate it into our diverse sets of habits, whether it is conversation or tango. We tend to protect our beliefs, about what we are, who the others are and how things ought to be seen, for the fear and pain that are likely to accumulate when putting myself into question.

Attaching identities to opinions makes every discussion turn into some sort of heated violence. This violence can also be observed on the dancing floor in the form of bodily fierceness. Though it's often simply grounded in ignorance. Seen from a different angle, as brilliantly, I think, exemplified by Paula Irene Villa's paper "Moving discourses, making you move" ("Bewegte Diskurse, die bewegen"), it is exactly these debates about the truth in tango that apparently keep it alive and interesting. Or, as Villa would say, permanent reflection and debating about the very essence of tango and so-called styles, etc. I can nothing but recommend this paper to all tango dancers.

➔ **Will it suffice, for the overcoming of inner blockades, to be internally mindful?**

The recognition of own blockades, whether they are of bodily or mental nature, may be regarded as the central key for changing the way you develop and learn. Changes cannot simply be made. It must be rooted in a profound understanding of how I am standing in the way of a natural process, even in dancing tango. Efforts that are over the top will quickly result into blockades. Clearly, there has to be an intention, but these strings must not be overstretched. These topics do not have to be taken up during the tango lessons in a therapeutic sense, but I am confronted with them every time I teach. According to the theorist on actionable knowledge, Argyris, in order to protect themselves from potential pain, embarrassments, threatening learning, adult learners develop a "trained incompetence" to dissolve identifications. These are defense routines designed to prevent from having own mental models critically evaluated.



Ute Walter

Holds a university degree in education and studied educational science, sociology and psychology. She has been teaching tango (workshops held, among others, in Argentina, Sweden, Switzerland and The Netherlands). She is co-initiator and organizer of the annual Hamburg event International Queer Tango Festival (www.queer-tango.de).

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But the very defense routines thwart the acquisition of knowledge and abilities that are considered truly essential by the student. The concept of internal mindfulness is a means to handle such situations.

➔ **Isn't the thesis that "bodily flexibility allows for mental flexibility" slightly too plain, or monocausal?**

Sure, expressed this way, it will be quite naturally ambiguous. It must be seen as a holistic view of things. A purely dualistic perspective on body and mind has by now been resolved in numerous fields. Current neuro-scientific research approaches provide an impressive evidence for it. I am seeking to use my thoughts about tango to pursue a movement theory approach that puts the close relationship between bodily and mental movements to the center and demands that movement capacity should be developed by seeing perception and movements as an entity, instead of considering the training of partial skills. This approach is not intended to fight and erase any "wrong" habits in doing and thinking. Being mindful about habits and putting them into question are the ideas behind this method. The developed capability to keep an even larger amount of the content of consciousness flowing is considered the basis for any creativity that is to burst open the limitedness of the current consciousness. A clear consciousness is required for letting the pictures of the current movement, the here and now, come, while mere habitually generated images of movements frequently have a counterproductive effect as the rhythmic entrenchments and automatizations evade consciousness and affect creativity. In dancing tango, I aim at liberating the consciousness from too many anticipatory ideas and images and, making it as "empty"

as possible, because it may affect the quality and coherence of movements as well as the communication between the partners.

➔ **What does tango mean to you? Meditative harmony, playful enjoyment of moving around, technical ability and erotically charged intimacy?**

Depending on what I put to the fore, what responses my partner and the music is triggering in me. So, it's very different. First of all, tango establishes a dialog with another person as well as with myself. The content of the dialog varies and is nearly indefinite.

➔ **Are you planning to publish the findings of your research in a book anytime soon?**

I am planning and holding workshops and seminar concepts derived from the working with different points I am interested in. These are, in the field of teaching tango, the topics 'Tango as Dialog', 'Tango and Mindfulness' and, for traditional dancers, trainings for tango teachers and the worldwide growing queer tango scene, which I apply approaches to for a qualitatively different communicative structure in tango. These approaches detach the tango from its gender-specific and heteronormative manifestations and fixations and resurface the essential nature of tango, its potential to developing an emancipated dialog. Thus, the training of mindfulness in teaching tango contains a subversive element as well. In cooperation with the organization consultants, I am providing opportunities outside of the field of teaching dancing, such as leadership and communication training. All these practical experiences are to be published in a book.

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