



# It's strictly tai chi

Robert Murray

Tai chi and Argentine tango are concerned with movement, balance, posture and control. Both are art forms. Tai chi is said to have a history going back more than a 1,000 years; tango is about 120 years old. Just on that basis tango has a lot to learn from tai chi. Tai chi is performed by an individual but, for me, is enhanced by accompanying students. Tango is performed in the embrace of another person and seeks to interpret the music. Both can be performed mindfully

UNESCO defined the tango that developed in Buenos Aires and Montevideo, around 1900, as an 'Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity'. Tango being defined as the dance, the music and the poetry. Despite Uruguay's contribution, that definition is referring to Argentine tango. [In 2020 Unesco gave the same accolade to tai chi. Unesco dates tai chi from the mid 17th century.]

There is naturally artistic development and nuevo tango encompasses changes in the music (Astor Piazzolla (2) and many modern orchestras) and changes in the dance (Frumboli, Naveira, Salas (3)). To abandon the music and its artistic development and to use alternative music is, for me, to abandon tango completely.

For a non-Spanish speaker, the poetry (the lyrics of the songs) is not very accessible. However there are translations available (4) and on many occasions in the history of tango, the fascist government of the time banned many songs and the slang language (lunfardo) that was used (5). Tango was the music and dance of the poor and was their escape at the end of a week of hard work. The lyrics were an outlet for lost love and social and political repression. The history of tango is bound up with the politics of Argentina and is a fascinating study.

This article focuses on how a study of the practice of tai chi can benefit the tango dancer.

## Tai chi – Looking for the Golden Needle

Yang Cheng-fu (1883-1936 AD) gave us ten principles to observe when we practise tai chi. A number of these can also apply to the tango.

We can immediately apply three of them. One: *suspend your head from above and keep it up straight*, three: *loosen your waist and drop the pelvis* and four: *drop your shoulders and sink your elbows* are just good posture. I despair of those men in tango who have their left hand into their own neck so that the left elbow is projected horizontally. This is incredibly dangerous but ensures space not otherwise available to them. Any sensible lead keeps their partner well clear of such aggressive dancing.

In the old days anybody showing the sole of the shoe, as in boleó or gancho, would be asked to leave the milonga. While that is no longer appropriate, I do wish somebody was in charge of floorcraft and dangerous embraces, although they would be very busy.

In tango the chest of the lead is crucial in communication to the follower and so breathing high into the chest can be an important factor and used to signify the end of a pause. Point two: *depress your chest and raise your upper back* is not for tango.

Point five: *distinguish between being solid and empty* is useful since most of the time we are on our axis on one leg (solid) with the other leg free (empty). This is a difficult, but essential, part of following, allowing the non-standing leg to be empty (belonging to the lead).

I think point six: *apply your will and not your force* is

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beautiful. As a lead, I don't want to be pushing and pulling my follower around the floor. I want to make suggestions as to what might come next, which might indeed be obvious to my follower if we are both feeling the music in the same way. There must be something physical in my lead, but not force. There is never need to contract muscles, unless embarking on a spectacular lift, taking the weight of the follower. More useful is the idea of extending the muscles which gives a relaxed control of the posture.

Standing in a typical tango posture ready to embrace or in a yang position (more exactly hun yuan), arms forward at shoulder height and curved, explore the extension of the muscles of the back. This takes away the weight of the arms and gives strength to the posture. It is possible to stand in such a posture for considerable time. Try the yang pose for five minutes, then longer and soon you will be in place for an hour and meditating. As soon as you start to contract muscles you will tire quickly.

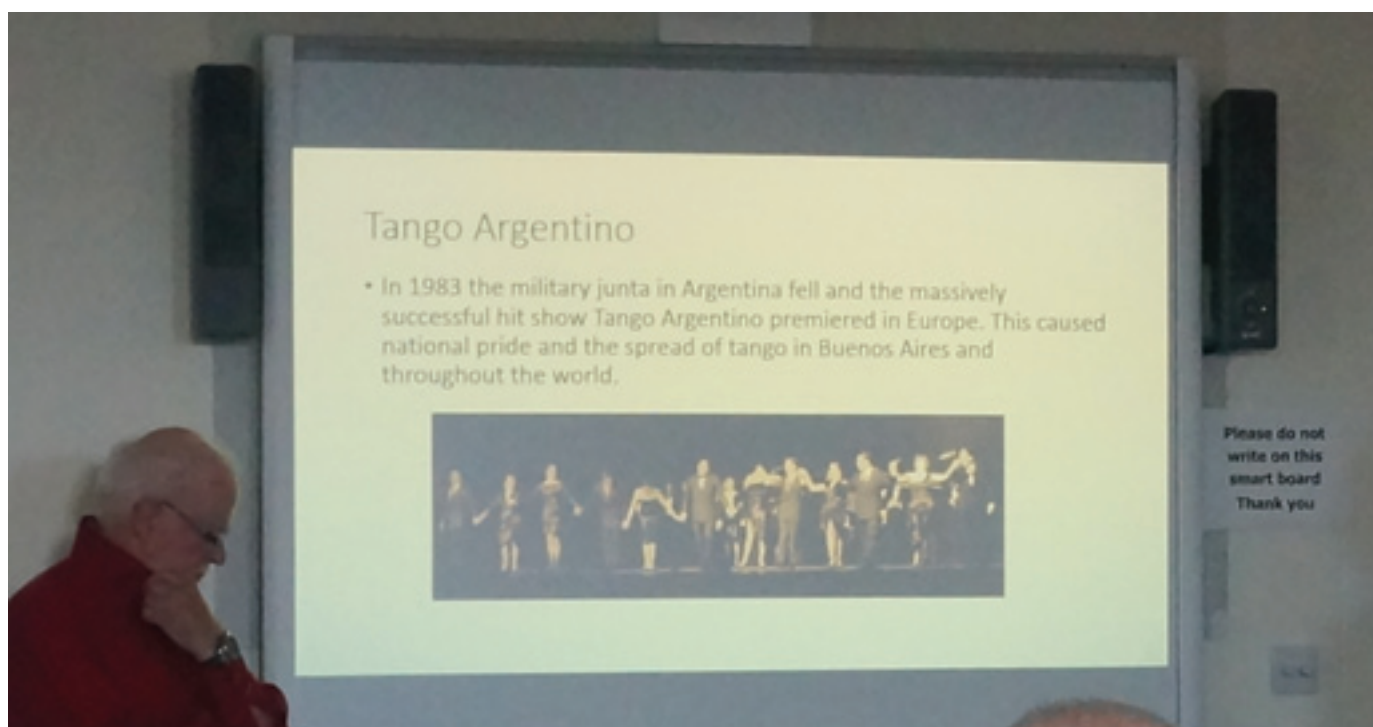


Point seven: *co-ordinate your upper and lower body movements* deals with dissociation. We can only walk in the direction our hips point us, unless we are side-stepping. A leg moving out at an angle is not tango. Our chest will be controlling where our partner is moving.

Point eight: *unify your external and internal movements* is about control, that we actually move where we want to move.

Point nine: *there must be absolute continuity in the movements* is clearly what we want to achieve, as in tango it is the music that will direct us. In tai chi we have names for different positions and we can practise getting into those positions but when we are moving through the form (a learnt series of moves), those positions are just transient.

We can be serene (point ten: *seek serenity in activity*) in both tai chi and tango if we are not overly concerned with what comes next. We need to learn the form in tai chi so that it comes naturally. In tango we need to maintain improvisation by using only those steps that we have made our own, that come naturally (7). If we move mindfully we will be serene. One of the tenets of tai chi is achieving serenity through activity. To be serene is often taken as stillness as part of the tranquility necessary. By moving



**Robert Murray gives a presentation on the influence of the musical Tango Argentina which greatly influenced the popularity of the Argentine tango worldwide**

through the form one can achieve a state of mind, accurately described as serene. There is no thought as to what comes next in the form, just a confidence that what is next will just come.

In tango we have the benefits, or complications, of a

'The vital quality of sung is lost by students who egotistically strive to 'look good'

partner, the music and the inherently spontaneous nature of the dance, so do we want to be serene in tango? I would suggest the music tells us (8). Certainly not in a milonga, which is fast, fun, grounded and dirty.

There is much lovely music which is certainly serene. As dancers we should always reflect the music and so, in the act of dancing with someone who feels the same about the music, that state of serenity can be achieved. Movements need not be planned but will happen in concert with the partner. As a leader I have to transcend thinking about what steps to use and dance as simply as possible and from the heart.

## Sung

Sung is the concept of being totally relaxed while being alert. In tai chi and some other martial arts, practitioners strive for this state. An animal waiting for its prey to emerge from hiding, is in this state and can remain thus for hours.

'The vital quality of sung is lost by students who egotistically strive to 'look good' during their performance to the detriment of their energy flow'. [Written by Tony

Henrys and transcribed by John Gent. February 1992]

This could equally apply to dancing tango. What is important, is not what onlookers see, but what partners feel when they dance truly together. In the 'old days' if a couple were dancing to clearly impress the onlookers, the Milongueros would toss some small coins onto the floor.

In the close embrace the follower should be striving for sung. The follower could be in the perfect physical position (maybe placed there by a teacher) and comfortable and confident that all is correct. However if the follower is not in the right mental state then a meaningful connection may not be achieved. Of course, if the lead is not cherishing the follower and giving protection, then sung





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will be impossible. Equally if the follower is thinking, "I don't like being close to this person" or "when are we going to dance fancy steps" the connection will not be there. Believe me, leaders can sense their followers mental state as well as their physical presence, and I am sure the reverse is also true.

Sung is an enhanced state of mind and body, it is NOT the follower simply switching off.

I think these thoughts can be useful in achieving connection.

## Mindfulness

Mindfulness is the awareness that arises when we pay attention, on purpose, to the present moment, non-judgementally.

Mindfulness is a skill that can be developed and practised and there are books to help (10).

In tai chi, being fully aware of one's own movements and breathing, being in the zone, gives the performance of the form a different feeling.

In dancing tango, we have more factors imposed on us. We must give attention to our partner, the people dancing around us and, of course, the music.



If dancing with a new partner this may take up a lot of our attention. Sometimes everything feels right and the connection and movement to the music is as good as it gets. As a couple we have a good chance of dancing mindfully provided others on the floor are dancing to the codigos of good floorcraft. Counter intuitively in some very crowded milongas, mindfulness can be achieved. In such places as Salon Canning in Buenos Aires, there is very little space. To stretch out an arm and swing it around would contact about six people and draw angry comments. One has to dance in close embrace and maintain that throughout the tanda. There is possibly only three or four moves that you feel, as a newcomer to these conditions, that you can execute safely. As a connected couple you move with the flow of the group in which

everybody is listening to, and interpreting, the music. You become part of the whole. It is like being in the audience and listening to your favourite orchestra playing. Your appreciation is so much enhanced above simply listening at home to a DVD of the same orchestra. Certainly if you watch such a group dancing and pick out a couple, you can expect to see them again in about five or ten minutes when they have completed a circuit. They will be the same distance into the group as when you first saw them. Couples move in lanes around the floor.

If you dance with a favoured partner with whom you have a good connection and have a series of preferred moves, then the chance of moving mindfully to the music is much enhanced. Such occasions are to be cherished.

## Elasticity

Many of the movements in tai chi involve using the elastic properties of the limbs. Every pivot in tango uses the torsion that can be built up by dissociating the top half of the body from the bottom half. This results in a smooth pivot rather than just throwing the body around.

The use of the elastic embrace is a relatively new technique with the lead pushing the follower away and using the momentum of the follower returning towards the lead in a variety of subsequent moves.

## Summary

As an ancient art form tai chi has much to offer in terms of body awareness, control and the dynamics of movement. The smooth control of weight moving from one leg to the other and the necessary posture enables the practitioner to look elegant while being strong in all positions. A study of tai chi can only be of benefit to students of Argentine tango. 🇦🇷

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- 7 Quote by Cacho Dante (posted on Facebook by Tango Mentor: "When they didn't really know how to dance, they did 20 steps; when they knew a bit more, they did ten and when they really knew what they were doing they danced five, but with real quality."
- 8 Nietzsche: "The onlookers thought the dancers were crazy, until they heard the music."
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- 10 *Mindfulness a practical guide to Finding Peace in a Frantic World*: M Williams, D Penman Published by Piatkus (2011)

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