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# *Tango Lingua* Introduction to Tango

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## Welcome

Tango is simply the fullest, deepest, most beautiful dance I know, so it is a pleasure to be writing this short introductory guide to it for you. If you have a copy of it in your hand, then it's likely you've already dipped your toes into this world of tango, or are about to. I hope you find this guide helpful and that you continue on to experience more of the unique riches that tango has to offer.

If you are fresh to tango, some of the following content may not make a lot of sense to you immediately. Do not worry, this guide is intended for you to be able to refer back to as you go through the beginner course and continue your learning.

Warmly,  
Joe Hudson

## What is Tango?

Tango is a dance where two people come together in an embrace and move to the music, seeking harmony with it and with each other. Tango is improvised and open ended, and can be different things to different people. But it also has a distinct flavour, which comes both from the music and from the set of stylized movements which have evolved over the generations as part of the dance.

Many of the dramatic stereo-types of tango which some people have, apply only - if there is any basis to them at all today - to a small part of what tango can be. Having said that, dressing up in snazzy clothes is part of the fun for many at certain tango social dances ('milongas').

The dance of tango, as legend has it, began in the slums and brothels around the port of 19<sup>th</sup> century Buenos Aires. The dance that arose was the fruit of both immigrant and native cultures. There were influences from Africa, Europe, and Latin America, including Cuba, Uruguay, Brazil, Spain and others, as well as Argentina.

From the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, tango spread out across the capitals of Europe and the United States, developing as it went. Today tango continues to evolve, both in Buenos Aires, which is still considered to be the tango capital of the world, and in tango communities across the globe. Naturally there are different styles of tango, but if you know one well it is (generally) not so hard to pick up another. At Tango Lingua we focus initially more on the modern 'nuevo' style.

Tango is a deep yet hugely accessible dance. Deep, because it is about closely and sensitively connecting with another person through movement. Consequently there is so much of human experience and emotion that can be shared and expressed through this dance, and there is always more to learn. Accessible for the same reason; that quality of connection is something that we all seek in our lives, and so tango has something to offer anyone who is open to exploring and sharing that connectedness. The techniques you learn and the practice is there only to help you in that aim. Anyone who can walk in a straight line and is willing to listen can learn to tango.

(It's worth saying that 'deep' doesn't necessarily mean 'serious' or 'sombre'. It's a depth that's there to explore if you want. Tango can be light hearted and very playful too, and that's part of its charm.)

## ***A social dance***

Tango is a social dance, where couples move around the dance floor in anti-clockwise circles, following a 'line of dance', with the idea of allowing a flowing and unobstructed path for all dancers. A place and occasion where tango is danced is called a 'milonga'.

Generally people are often happy to dance with different partners when invited. An invitation to dance is traditionally made with eye contact and a nod of the head, or similar visual gesture of agreement.

This process is called the 'cabeceo'. The leader will then walk to the follower and the dance can begin. In many places people simply invite by asking directly, without using the cabeceo, although more experienced dancers tend to prefer the cabeceo method.

It is never obligatory to dance if you do not want to, but it is customary to dance to 3 (sometimes 4) pieces of music before parting. This is known as a 'tanda'. The interval between tandas where couples change, or decide to continue, is known as a 'cortina'.

When someone says 'thank you' it is generally taken to mean 'Thank you, I'm happy to finish our dances now.' (So if you want to carry on dancing with someone, try to think of something else to say other than 'thank you', between dances.)

## ***The leader and follower***

In tango one person 'leads', while the other 'follows'. In truth, to fully experience the joys of this dance, the leader must also be a follower, and the follower a leader.

But in simple terms, the leader's role is to invite the follower to take the next step, while ensuring it is safe to do so and that the space isn't blocked by other dancers. The follower's role is to listen to the leader and answer their invitations, in a way that feels good to the follower and maintains the connection.

If the leader invites while also listening attentively to how the follower is responding then the dance will become more connected and enjoyable. Similarly if the follower responds to the leader's invitations while trying to stay present in the embrace, then the dance will

become more connected. If both leader and follower do these things, then each can become more trusting and confident in their own movements and their partner's. The result is tango magic, a state where you move in improvised harmony together, guided only by touch and the music.

Some people hear the terms 'leader' and 'follower' and assume tango is about one person telling someone else what to do, or shunting them around the dance floor. This couldn't be further from the truth when it comes to the kind of tango which Tango Lingua aims to teach. The concepts of leader and follower exist within a context of respectful collaboration.

A good leader is a good listener, and never dictates a movement, only invites and awaits whatever response is given. A good follower is not silent, but gives their own creative input to the dance (where they wish to) and gives a confident presence in the embrace - while trying to move in harmony with and sensitivity to their partner. In this kind of tango, a dance is a two way conversation between leader and follower.

Notice above the leader is not referred to as male, or the follower as female. Both roles can be enjoyed by either gender. While traditionally men lead and women follow (in tango at least), and the majority seem to prefer it that way, it is not uncommon to see women dancing with women or men with men. When learning, it can be very helpful to practice some of the opposite role to the one you're focusing on. Doing this will help you develop your tango connection and sensitivity skills.

## Some basic principles

Tango can be seen as being made up of three pieces, that when learnt and brought together truly bring the dance to life: The embrace. Movement. The music. Here is an outline of those pieces with some guidance on how to develop them in your own dance.

### *1. The embrace*

Tango is danced by two people in contact. This contact is referred to as the embrace. It is through this embrace that you are able to move in harmony with someone, purely by touch. The magical sense of connection in tango comes from a certain quality in the embrace.

Tango can be danced in a range of open and close embraces, according to preference and the music. The embrace can also be changed in the course of a dance.

Imagine you are hugging someone who you feel trust in and warmth for. Imagine the quality of contact that your bodies share in this natural gesture. There is a certain 'presence' and sense of connectedness that comes from your bodies pressing together. If you were merely standing together and patting each other on the back, without that positive, fully engaging contact, it would feel like a much lesser, more distant kind of hug in comparison. It is by giving this positive contact that you make it clear that you *want* to connect with someone, and it is by receiving it that you can be clear that someone wants to connect with

you.

Going from the hug described above, with a few adjustments to hand position, what you have is a close embrace which you can dance tango with. It is this *quality* of contact which allows two people to communicate clearly with each other in a physical and musical way. This means you can open out the embrace, so that your chests are no longer in direct contact, and still keep that quality of firm, positive presence that says 'I want to connect with you'.

The embrace should be comfortable at all times and (with certain clear exceptions) your posture should be well balanced and upright, while keeping your neck, shoulders and breathing relaxed.

Take your time entering the embrace. Once the embrace is made and before you begin to step into the dance there is generally a movement known as the 'balanceo'. This is where, with feet together, the leader changes their weight between standing legs a number of times, and the follower follows that movement. This allows the leader and follower to 'tune in' to each other. The balanceo is part of the beginning of a dance.

## 2. Movement

There would not be much of a dance without movement. In tango generally steps are made on the beats of the music, or with the melody. The music is a guide for both leader and follower.

In tango, a step is not just a step. It is a consequence of a couple moving *together*. By focusing on the togetherness of the movement, there arises infinite possibilities for playful improvisation. What this means is that a step could begin, and then stop half way, change direction or change speed. The step is only a consequence of leader and follower staying connected. Tango is an improvised dance.

Just as a step is not 'just a step', the same idea applies to crosses, ochos, giros, barridas, sacadas, ganchos, volcadas, colgadas, boleos, enrosques, piernazos, soltadas, enganches and just about all of the tango vocabulary. The movement, within the system of tango, is a consequence of following the underlying principles of connection (with some room for creative interpretation of course).

There are a few habits of mind and body that will help you stay connected with your partner, all of which are covered in detail in Tango Lingua classes. Here are some of them in summary:

### Stillness

The idea is that maintaining an inner calm, avoiding rushing, or thinking you have to catch up, it is easier to stay connected. A key way of finding this 'stillness' is to focus your attention only on the physical connection of the embrace and the music, while looking after your posture and balance, so that your body can enjoy a *sense* of stillness – even in movement – along with your mind.

As a leader, remember no matter how fast or large a step you lead, always leave time to listen to how that lead is being followed, before moving through the step yourself. Never force your follower to move.

As a follower, remember whenever a lead is not clear is it invariably better to remain still until it becomes clear, rather than try to guess. If the lead is clearly felt, but the movement is unfamiliar, allow yourself, with good balance and posture, to move according to how your body is invited, trusting it will be safe and being open to new possibilities.

As a leader and follower, remember if you lose the music or the sense of connection, take a moment to be still, make any adjustments to your embrace, breath and smile. It will then be easier to lead and follow the next step with confidence and find the connection again.

Try to avoid the distraction of apologizing for 'mistakes' - which generally only emphasize a loss of connection and stillness, and instead just try to listen more.

One result of developing this quality of stillness and inner calm is that movements become more efficient and smoother.

## Balance and form

If your own balance and posture are stable and strong then you are better able to move in harmony with your partner and the music, and to give the positive presence in the embrace that allows the connection to be maintained. Aiming for that inner sense of stillness will help you find your balance, but there is no substitute for training and practice.

An alarming number of people today spend most of their waking hours sat in a chair. This is not a natural state; we are built to move. The result is that our natural physical balance and posture deteriorate. However, regular tango technique practice will fix that right up! During the warm-ups and also in the lessons you will do a series of repetitive movements. Practising those regularly and attentively, between classes, will help.

Here are some useful concepts and practices relating to form, posture and balance in tango movement. Reading through them it might appear complex if you're a beginner. However, the point of them all is purely to help your movements become *simpler*, more efficient, better feeling and connected. With practice they will become second nature. There are always exceptions in tango, but these are good general rules:

- **The floating head.** Standing still, position your neck so that your head is perfectly balanced over your shoulders. You should be able to feel a sense of lightness and relaxation in your neck muscles. This is the 'floating head'. How keeping that sensation, position your shoulders and chest so that it is perfectly balanced over your hips, with a straight back. Your shoulders should be down and relaxed, but not slumped. Now try to keep that balanced upright posture while walking and dancing.
- **Align your core.** Your 'core' refers to the postural muscles around your trunk. When these muscles are engaged, you are stabilised and it becomes easier to balance. Think about drawing in your lower abdominals and muscles around your waist and hips to do this. Aim to only allow *rotational movements* of your core, around the axis of your spine, rather than bending from side to side, or back and forth. Having this core stability also

makes it much easier to keep the sense of connection in the embrace.

- **Walk in a straight line.** Since tango is danced socially with couples moving anti-clockwise in lines around the dance floor, it's useful to be able to walk in a straight line – in terms of where you place your feet. However it's also useful to be able to walk in a straight line in terms of your head staying level. By minimizing 'bobbing' as you walk, the movement will become smoother and more controlled. It's natural to have some vertical movement while walking, but aim to keep it small.

Facing a mirror, extend one leg forward, keeping the weight on the back leg and with front leg straight and the foot touching the floor. Your back leg will be slightly bent and your back straight and upright. Now, slowly, begin to transfer your weight onto the front leg. As you do that begin to bend your front leg so that your head stays perfectly at the same level in the mirror. Complete the step and repeat with a back step. Extend a leg backwards, perfectly straight and then begin transferring weight as above, bending the leg as you do to keep your head at the same level in the mirror.

When walking in tango aim to first straighten your legs before bending them as you transfer weight onto them between each step. This gives an elegant appearance and allows greater range and creative possibilities.

- **Brushing knees.** When walking, generally aim to brushing your knees together, or very close, between each step. The reason for doing this is that it helps you to walk in a straight line, aids stability and looks elegant. It is also one of the consistent elements of tango movement which facilitates improvisation.
- **Chest is free, hips in line with knee.** In tango there is something called 'disassociation' (nothing to do with psychoanalysis). This means your upper body turns in a spiral fashion, not as a rigid block. When you turn, your waist and chest will begin the movement, starting with your chest. *But your hips will stay facing in the direction that your legs are currently pointing* – until you are balanced on the ball of your foot and ready to turn. The reasons for having your chest free, and keeping your hips in line with your knees is because this is both an efficient and elegant way to turn (and lead turns). With practice this approach allows the speed and degree of turn to be precisely and effortlessly controlled.

Stand facing a wall, feet together and arms out to the side. Slowly turn from the chest and waist in one direct, while keeping your hips perfectly facing the wall, not moving an inch. Do both sides several times, until you feel a comfortable stretch. You will feel your oblique muscles working. The spiral you're creating with your chest, waist and hips is how you should aim to turn while dancing.

- **Find your axis before your hips turn.** Imagine you are making a turn where your foot will pivot on the floor. The preferred way to pivot is on the ball of your foot (not the heel where you risk hurting your knee or the heel sticking). In order to pivot on the ball of your foot in a controlled and balanced way, you must first have all your weight on the foot, *before* it pivots along with your hips.

Now to string it all together to make a turn, first extend your leg and begin to transfer weight in order to make a step. As you do that begin turning your chest towards the side

of your body with the leg forward. Now when all your weight is on the ball of your front foot, simply release the back foot and allow your hips to catch up with your chest, *like a spring unwinding*. As your hips turn, be sure that your front knee stays in line with them.

- **Stepping into the ground.** Walking is the most common and some would say the most enjoyable element of tango. This is one idea that helps balance or 'groundedness' while walking, and also presence in the embrace. Imagine that instead of stepping *on* the ground, you are stepping *into* the ground with each step, say 4 or 5 inches. With each step, press into the ground with your feet, and try to maintain the pressure through the whole step. As the front foot does this you will notice the back one does it too. Observe the difference to how firmly rooted to the ground you feel while walking and 'stepping into the ground'.

When you offer a firm presence in the embrace, allow the 'resistance' to come up from your connection with the ground, rather than from tensing your shoulders.

- **Angle your feet.** When stepping in tango, forwards or back, it helps to have an outward angle of your feet. Imagine how a tightrope walker angles their feet on the rope. Aim for approximately 30 degrees, not 90 degrees Charlie Chaplin style. The outward angle will help your stability (because you are creating a triangle with your points of contact with the floor, instead of a single foot-width line), and opens up creative possibilities.

## Presence

You are connected with someone when you feel their presence. If you do not feel their presence you cannot move in a connected way (at least in tango) together. Some dancers prefer a heavy or firmer kind of presence, others light, and all shades between. It's a personal choice, although it's easier to begin with a firmer kind of presence.

One way of understanding this concept of 'presence' is to imagine you are standing comfortably up to the shoulders in water. When you are still, how do you feel? Light with just a gentle pressure from the weight of the water. Aim to have that same quality of presence you have with the water against your skin, when standing still in the embrace.

Now, back in the water, imagine stepping forward, back or to the side, how does it feel? Suddenly you feel the weight of the water much more as you try to move through it. There is an inertia when you start to move, then a *steady resistance* as you continue, and, if you stop suddenly, also momentum as the water wants to continue moving in the direction you sent it in. All of this you feel very clearly through your body. This felt presence of the water as you move through it is a completely natural consequence of your movement. Aim to have that same quality of presence with your partner when you move with them, in response to the energy in their movement.

Notice when you are in water the stronger or faster your movements, the more strong the resistance of the water becomes. The water *yields* to your movements, but it *mirrors* the energy in them too. So when you're 'being like water' (while keeping a good posture, of course), aim for this *yielding yet mirroring* quality. Remember, if you move into water it never runs away from you, and if you draw back through it, it never runs after you. It always

*reflects back* the energy you give it.

As you continue to learn tango you will discover ways of changing the figurative 'water' you are moving through into 'clay', which allows more slow and controlled movements to be lead and followed at certain times. This will be covered in later courses, once you're comfortable with the basics.

Naturally the qualities of stillness and balance help you to provide this quality of presence in the embrace.

### ***3. The music***

Music is a source of inspiration, a provider of rhythm and a bridge on which you meet with your partner to dance tango. The traditional music of tango evolved along with the dance, in Buenos Aires, arising (like the dance) from a mix of musical styles. Today, tango being a global phenomenon, people dance it to all kinds of music, from scratchy old recordings of classics, to contemporary artists, and even mainstream pop. (Although many still hold the classic music from the 'golden era' of the 1930's – 1950's dearest to their hearts, for its unique rhythmic and melodic richness, and its cultural connection with the dance.)

It is not necessary to know the music you're dancing to well, to dance well, but it can certainly help, especially with the more traditional music. Of course, knowing the music well is one of the joys of the dance, where certain pieces or artists become like friends you've created many happy memories with. The more you practice the more familiar you'll find the music becomes, and the easier you'll pick up new songs to dance to. Just listening to the music regularly can help too.

After you've been dancing tango for a while, you'll find that whenever you hear something you could imagine tangoing to, your mind will often do exactly that, if not your feet too. True tango addicts can be spotted while doing their shopping, stepping in time and 'decorating' to the musak – but those are the 'serious cases'. It does go to show though that tango becomes something within you, and that if you can walk to a piece of music then you can also tango to it.

There are broadly three types of music to tango to: 'tango', 'milonga' and 'vals'. Milonga is the quickest and oldest in the world of tango, and tends to be danced with the most regular step in 2/4 time. Tango has more variation in rhythm and tempo around a 2/4 or 4/4 time. It also varies more in emotional character, despite the predominantly down-beat lyrics of much of the traditional tangos, which reflected the mood and struggles of the times. Vals is the tango equivalent of waltz music, and has 3/4 time. All three categories can be traditional or contemporary in style.

Dancing tango to live music is highly recommended and quite a distinct experience from dancing to recorded music. With live music there is not only a connection between dance partners, but also between the dancers and the musicians, which can greatly enhance the experience for everyone.

# Setting out to learn

Perhaps now you're excited to jump in and experience what tango is all about. Or perhaps you're wondering if tango might be too challenging, or more than you bargained for? Every beginner will have their own reaction to the idea of learning tango. People want different things from tango and everyone will learn in different ways and at different rates.

But let me try to make one thing clear; while in many dances two people move together in a connected way, in tango this connectedness is the heart of the dance itself. To truly move in harmony with someone else is a skill akin to speaking a different language or playing a musical instrument. As a language of physical connection, it's one we all speak at least a little of, but for tango this skill must be developed.

So then learning tango well takes some time and lots of practice. Providing you can understand that, and don't judge yourself for not being 'fluent' after a few weeks, then the learning process can be tremendously enjoyable! It really can be like discovering a whole new world and side of yourself. Enjoy the process.

In a culture awash with instant gratification and constant marketing that lets you know you're somehow not good enough (unless you buy something), tango can challenge the patience, or self-confidence, of many. But there are rich treasures there for those who are willing and open-minded enough to learn.

Of course tango is also a social activity, and you will find people from all backgrounds, ages and interests take to this dance. It's a great way to get to know interesting people you might never have had the chance to meet otherwise. For the most part, the tango scene is a friendly and hospitable one.

After a Tango Lingua beginner course you'll know enough to be able to practice with others or go to a milonga. Further instruction is available for those who wish to deepen their knowledge and refine their skills. But finally, before you start, please consider that tango can be particularly addictive. Your life may not be the same after starting this journey!

How often should you practice and take lessons? This will depend both on what you want from tango and your situation. If you want to learn quickly then at least 1 lesson a week plus 1 group practice session or milonga (preferably one of each, but really as many as you can make it to), plus daily individual practice – working on your balance, movement and posture – for at least 10 minutes, is highly recommended.

Essentially the more you can immerse yourself in dancing tango, the quicker and more deeply you will learn it. Tango festivals and weekend workshops are great ways of doing that. One-to-one lessons will also accelerate your progress and help you get over sticking points. If you're content to take the slow route and enjoy tango mainly just for the social side of the dance – as many do – then regular practice is still important, but not quite as essential. Dance for the joy it gives you.

Finally if you're just setting out on this tango journey, then welcome to the club.

*Please let me know how you found reading this guide, email: [contact@tangolingua.com](mailto:contact@tangolingua.com) Thank you!*