



Photo: Meredith James

Belly Dance Student Guide

A comprehensive handbook to accompany your Belly Dance course - by
Australia's 2006 Student's Choice "Teacher of the Year" Shemiran Ibrahim

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Welcome

Hello Students!

What a journey you started in taking up Belly Dancing! When women sign up for Belly Dance classes they do so for many different reasons; to get fit, to tone up, to do something different or lose weight. What most women don't know is that they are about to open a treasure chest so deep, its goodness can enrich their lives for years to come. If they stick with it, Belly Dance will help them fall in love with their body; a key factor in any woman's true sense of joy in life.

Belly Dancing is a mind/body/spirit practice, with its roots in ancient wisdom. It will open you up on all levels, if you allow it to. It is a precious gift you are giving to yourself, and will only benefit you in positive ways. It will help you feel better in your body by using parts of your body you may have forgotten you had.

Belly Dancing is not easy; many new students get discouraged and leave prematurely. Please hang in there! If you go to class and make your first and foremost priority to have fun, and your teacher teaches you good technique but also inspires joy and a sense of community, then stick with it and slowly but surely you will find your body moving the way you want it to. What I always say to Beginner Belly Dance students is that; you have heard the call of the wild, something beyond your usual horizons is calling you. It doesn't call every woman, so if it knocks on your door I believe it is trying to give you a gift uniquely suitable to you. So if you are a Beginner, please finish at least your first term before passing judgement on either the dance, or your ability. For those of you who are more advanced, you will find many gems in this Student Guide as well.

Part of what discourages new students is a lack of understanding of what is going on for them that is creating the discouragement. This free **Belly Dance Student Guide** will help you in your learning process on all levels, giving you valuable information including:

- ❖ Choosing a teacher
- ❖ Belly Dance Principles: Upper Body & Lower Body
- ❖ The seven core movements of Belly Dance; step by step technical instruction
- ❖ How to overcome fears and self-doubt as a student
- ❖ Introduction to the different styles of Belly Dance
- ❖ Belly Dancing cultural and ritualistic understanding
- ❖ Ten simple tips to make your Belly Dance learning fun & get more out of each class

Choosing a Belly Dance Teacher

What to look for and what to avoid when choosing your teacher

Before you enrol

Decide on what you want out of the course. Are you feeling like you want to learn Belly Dance seriously and maybe become a performer somewhere down the line, or are you looking for something fun and different to do to get fit? Whatever your reasons, make sure you are choosing a teacher with credentials. Every teacher should have some form of promotional vehicle that clearly explains her professional training, teaching and/or performing history. In any case, whatever your goals are from your course, please enrol with a teacher who has had at least 5 years of training with a reputable teacher.

Unfortunately, many people start teaching without the necessary knowledge and experience behind them, and this can rob you of a great initial experience with Belly Dance. If you get turned off from the beginning, you may never come back so please choose wisely from the start.

Starting your Belly Dance course

A good teacher will know her stuff, having been training in Belly Dance with reputable teachers for a long time, and will have the teacher's knack; one of explaining things in a simple way that helps beginners not only understand what to do, but also to enjoy the experience. A good teacher will also have the spirit of a teacher; one that is there in service to her students and the dance, one that transcends ego and personalities and personal achievement. A good teacher never looks down on her students and is proud of each and every student and their effort, no matter how small. If you ever had a good teacher in school, you know, the one you never forget, she/he was probably just like this. A good teacher, a real teacher, always comes from the heart.

If your teacher compares, judges, pushes you beyond your limits, belittles or is patronising, find another teacher! A good teacher interacts with her students in one way; with respect. Some dancers who go into teaching just because they want to make an extra buck can get frustrated and take out their negative energy on their students. The best thing you can do is leave and find yourself a teacher who is wise, unjudgemental, lets everyone work at their own pace, and respects EVERY student.

At the same time I would urge you to show respect back to your teacher. Some students come to class with attitude, and it can really distract the classroom. The teacher/student relationship needs to be built on mutual and equal respect.

Never be afraid to ask questions in class, a good teacher will welcome the input as it will give her an indication of where the class is at, or what she needs to pay more attention to. The students and teacher co-create the classroom, so become an active part of your learning processes.

Belly Dance Principles - Lower Body

Technique for feet, and the two poses of Belly Dance

NOTE: These following technical notes are not intended to be used on their own. They are there to supplement the student's in-class learning as most teachers do not offer notes, and most students find themselves going home and forgetting what they learnt. Please use these notes in conjunction with a Beginner level Belly Dance course, or to brush up on your basics if you are more advanced.

Each Belly Dance teacher in the world will teach in her own way, but there are fundamentals and basics that all teachers will cover at some point or other. So please use the following notes to help you elaborate on what you are learning in class, and hopefully help you practice a bit at home before next week's class!

The Classical form of Belly Dance is known as Danse Orientale and is the basic form out of which most other styles come from. Getting the basics is so important, I can't emphasise it enough. The foundation of any building needs to be strong so that beautiful architecture can be built upon it. Same with the basic structures and postures of Belly Dance. Please work hard in the beginning to get your feet and your posture right, they will be the foundation that will carry your form.

Belly Dancing Principle

All Belly Dancing starts in the feet. Generate the movement from the ground up. Connect to the earth and always have your feet in correct posture for the move you are trying to do. You may think you need to generate the movement in your hip, but the real origin of the movement will be in your feet, weight distribution and knees. Get the structure right and the form will look after itself. Like the base of a pyramid, the feet are the foundation that hold up the both the structure of your movement, and beauty of your form.

Basic Feet Postures

There are two postures for the feet in belly dance. These poses can be used on the spot, and in traveling.

On the Flat

Means your foot is flat on the floor, connecting to the Earth, feeling Her energy.

On the Toe

Means balancing on the ball of your foot with your toes firmly grounded.

Fundamental Belly Dance Poses

There are two poses, structures if you like, upon which all Belly Dance movements happen:

The Basic Pose

The Classical Pose

I cannot emphasize enough the importance of getting your feet and weight distribution right. Please pay a lot of attention to this in the beginning.

The Basic Pose - Feet under hips

- Feet under hips. Distribute your weight evenly between the two.
- Feel your weight in the centre of each foot, neither leaning forward nor back into your heels.
- Both feet always pointing forward, and parallel to each other.
- Knees released - neither locked or bent, thighs strong holding up your weight.
- VERY IMPORTANT: Slightly pull in the muscle that runs across the lower belly, roughly 1-2 inches below your navel, ever so slightly, think 5%. This will save your lower back from injury as it will elongate your tailbone. Your tailbone MUST be elongated in Belly Dance.
- Rib cage lifted, shoulders totally let go, head high like a Queen.

The Classical Pose - One foot forward & up on ball of the foot (Toe)

- Start in the Basic Pose.
- Holding this pose, put one foot out to the front, and slightly to the side. Bend knee.
- Bring this foot up on the ball. This is your "Working" side; working leg, working knee, working hip.
- Put your weight into your back foot and leg, and keep this foot flat. This is your "Supporting" side. Release the supporting knee, never lock it. Activate supporting thigh to hold up your weight.
- Both feet always pointing forward, and parallel to each other.
- You want to feel really centred and balanced.
- Thighs, inner thighs and knees together - as opposed to far apart - this adds elegance to your form.
- VERY IMPORTANT: Slightly pull in the muscle that runs across the lower belly, roughly 1-2 inches below your navel, ever so slightly, think 5%. This will save your lower back from injury as it will elongate your tailbone. Your tailbone MUST be elongated in Belly Dance
- Chest lifted, shoulders totally let go, and head high like a Queen.

Classical Arms: Same arm as supporting leg is up at a 45-degree angle, palm facing down. The arm on the working leg side is at breast level or down with hand pointing to working hip saying *"Look at my beautiful hip!"*

Belly Dance Principles - Upper Body

Technique for arms and hands, and energetic understanding in Belly Dance

Following are some basic principles for arms and hands. Arms and hands take time to master, so go easy on yourself! In your first term focus on your feet and hips dancing out the rhythm. With time, you start layering your upper body and arms on top of your lower body movements to dance out the melody.

Adult learning is difficult and takes time. Think how hard it is to start learning playing the piano as an adult. Starting to play with one hand is not so hard, but when you try to use both hands together doing different things it gets more challenging. That's what layering your upper body on top of your lower body movements can feel like, so be easy on yourself.

Belly Dance Hand Pose

There is one hand pose or posture in Belly Dance, thank Goddess! Compared to Classical Indian dancing which has 28 single hand and 23 double-hand "*mudras*" or gestures to master! So, let's be thankful of the only one in Belly Dance.

Here's how it goes;

- Hold your hands in front of you, palms down and release your knuckles.
- Thumb down, pinkie up and curved.
- Middle finger level and as a natural extension of the arm, neither lifted nor drooped.
- Index and ring fingers slightly higher than middle finger. If you want to get really technical, the ring finger is slightly higher than index in the Classical style, but I must say I don't know many dancers who go so far. As a beginner Belly Dance student, just keeping these three middle fingers together, with the outer two slightly above the middle is enough of a challenge, and will give you instant good form.
- Knuckles together and released. No stiff hands and knuckles, it will block the flow of energy.
- Hold hands as extensions of arms, do not break at the wrists. Fingers alive all the way to the tips.
- IMPORTANT NOTE: Keep hands stress-free. This will take time as in the beginning you will be training the muscles needed to hold the pose and that might stiffen things a little. Keep feeling your heart energy in the centre of your palms.
- IMPORTANT NOTE: Beginner students tend to either stiffen their fingers and not let go, or droop their fingers inwards in what a sort of chicken-claw

position. Watch out for both situation and remember to keep your fingers alive to the fingertips.

Hands channel your heart energy, and a beautiful and well-trained dancer can be told by her beautiful hands. Hands also are used to direct audience attention where the dancer wants it to go, they can point to a moving hip, or frame a movement or facial expression.

General Arm Posture

Always have elbow released, soft never straight planks. At the same time, never bend them, this gives you chicken wings. Arms channel your heart's energy from it to your hands and out to the world, so think of that when moving your arms. Once you start getting your lower body movements you will want to know what to do with your arms. Some basic positions are arms out to the side at breast level and slightly hugging forward, or down by hips, or up in the air in a V shape. However you hold them remember they are the framers of your movements, so use logic when positioning them. Support the supporting side of the movement with a framing arm up in the air or behind the ear; add spice to the working side of the movement with a working arm that is alive and that travels to wherever you want to attract attention.

Belly Dance Principle - Giving and Receiving

As in life - so in dance. When you dance you need to give your energy and attention to the audience, then you need to come back to yourself and receive their attention. Always remember you must go to that still space of receiving, so that you can fill up and give again.

Arm Positions

Keeping arms soft and graceful, hands alive and fingers together in the proper posture. There are many positions for the arms in both the Basic and Classical Poses. Most of these positions are not regimented. Once you learn them, it is *generally* up to you to use whatever combination best suits your expression and the music. However there are some exceptions to the rule, if in doubt while experimenting with your arms please make sure you check with your teacher.

Up in "V" Shape

Arms up to the sky in a proud V, shooting out of your chest with your heart energy. Keep elbows released!

Breast Level

Arms out at breast level, holding the space in front of you. Elbows released and softly pointing to the back wall of the room.

Hip Level

In the form of an inverted "V" With hands directing attention to hips.

Hands Behind Head

Holding up you hair sensually.

One Hand Behind Ear

As if cupping your head from behind your ear. The other arm out to side or down. This pose is appropriate only for certain moves.

There are other positions, but these are some of the main ones. You can use a mixture of these, with one arm up and the other down etc. The general rule though is that the lower arm is used to bring attention to the working hip, to where the movement is as if to say "Look at my beautiful hip!" The arm pointing up generally frames your form, frames the movement, and does so by being on the same side as the supporting part of the body.

Belly-Breath Energising System

Always breathe like in yoga. In through the nose, to the belly, then out through the mouth. Think of your belly like a petrol tank that energises your motor and can run empty and need refuelling. Refuel by breathing and by having your attention in your belly when you breathe; the energy of the breath will go there. Where attention goes, energy flows. This will also help keep your heart open when you dance, instead of contract and shut down your entire energy system which leads to a hollow performance/dance.

Always keep breathing THROUGH THE MOVEMENT. This is an important principle in Belly Dance. Keep conscious of your breath, without it your body will tense up, and the movement cannot flow. The movement will then neither feel good to you on the inside, nor look good to the audience. Breathing in this fashion re-energises your whole system.

The Seven Movements of Belly Dance

Step-by-step technique on how to do the core movement groups of Belly Dance

NOTE: These following technical notes are not intended to be used on their own. They are there to supplement the student's in-class learning with a good teacher. Please use these notes in conjunction with a Beginner level Belly Dance course, or to brush up on your basics if you are more advanced.

Each Belly Dance teacher in the world will teach in her own way, but there are fundamentals and basics that all teachers will cover at some point or other. So please use the following notes to help you elaborate on and recall what you are learning in class and encourage you to practice a bit at home before next week's class!

Following are the core movement groups that make up Classical & Modern Belly Dance, grouped according to the shape you are drawing with your body, and then sub-grouped according to the part of the body used to draw that shape. I call each group a "Family" of movements, which then has members on the Lower Body, Mid Body and Upper Body.

Belly Dancing Principle

If you can draw a shape using your lower body (hips and feet) you can probably draw that shape using your mid body (chest) and upper body (shoulders, neck, head, arms, hands).

Following are the seven core **Families of Movement** that create most of Belly Dance:

1. Lifts and Drops Family
2. Slides Family
3. Shimmy Family
4. Twists Family
5. Circles Family
6. Figure 8's Family
7. Undulations

Lifts & Drops Family of Movements

On the Lower Body

Basic Hip Lifts & Drops

- Stand in Basic Pose.
- Bend the knee to drop the hip, straighten the knee to lift the hip.
- Always drop before a lift, and lift before a drop to accentuate the movement.
- Never lock the knee when straightening, always keep them released.
- Activate your thigh muscles to either push the hip up, or pull it down. So the movement technically comes from the knee and the thigh muscle/hip.

Classical Hip Drop

A typical Egyptian move from the Classical Pose.

- Weight in supporting leg, right foot forward on ball of foot (Toe position), knees soft. Don't lean back, stay centred.
- Lift working hip, in this case the right hip, upward slightly.
- Drop right hip downward in a strong accented move.
- Upper body stays steady.
- A heavy deep-seated drop is followed by a lighter "half drop"; on the counts of 1 & 3 deep, and on the counts of 2 & 4 half.
- Kick working foot softly on the half drops, on the 2 & 4 counts, like brushing the sand off the carpet.

Belly Dancing Principle

In order to move a part of your body in one direction, first move it in the opposite direction. E.g. If you are trying to do a hip drop, first lift that hip slightly to do the drop. This give you the space your need to create the movement, which will help you create a bigger, fuller and more juicy movement.

Classical Hip Lift

A typical Turkish and Lebanese move, features less in traditional Egyptian Belly Dancing. It is the opposite of the Drop, less grounded and more exuberant. Lift the working hip upward and slightly forward in a strong accented move. Activate the out side of your thigh and your hip to give the movement oomph. And, using the principle above, drop slightly first before you lift.

On the Mid Body

Chest Drops and Chest Lifts

A small but effective thrust of the rib cage with an accent either upwards or downwards. Remember, to go up you must first go down and vice versa. Visualise a string attached to your spine in the centre of your chest. Imagine a puppeteer pulling this string upwards on a 45 degree angle. Generate the movement from the inside of your body and you will have a much more beautiful and juicy movement.

On the Upper Body

Shoulder Drops

The only effort is to bring your shoulders up together, then, let both go. Careful not to shrug and draw your shoulders forward and up to your ears which locks your upper back and your energy flow. Fast Shoulder Drops look great while swaying your body from side-to-side, and shifting weight on legs.

The Slides Family of Movements

On the Lower Body

Hip Slide

- Assume Basic Pose with feet under hips etc.
- Shift your weight from leg to leg, straightening supporting knee and releasing the other.
- Get into the rhythm of this, and then slide your hip out to side as weight transfers into that foot, then back in connecting to your centre and so on.
- Imagine you have your arms full of groceries and you push the car door shut with your hip!

Variations:

- Small, isolated.
- Larger, more thrusting to the side, more assertive also known as the "flick".

On the Mid Body

Chest Slide

- Imaging a string attached to your spine behind your heart.
- A puppeteer pulls that string to the right, your rib cage moves to the side, independently from your shoulders and hips.

Belly Dance is an organic dance, but it also teaches us to move different parts of our bodies in isolation. Try to move the chest out to the side while keeping the rest of your body relatively still. This is not a rule of thumb across the board. It really applies best to the small, accented movements such as this. The chest slide is a very small isolated movement yet can be very effective for accenting the music.

On the Upper Body

Head Slide

Keep facing ahead. Use the muscles behind the neck to slide your head to the right, then the left, keeping it as horizontal as possible. Lovely move when framed with your hands crossing in front of your face, or crossing above the head.

Warning: Practice this move very gently, only after a good warm up of the neck muscles to avoid injury. Do not do anything that feels painful. This movement needs only to be very small to be effective, so do not over-extend your self. This move is difficult and takes time to master. Go easy.

The Shimmy Family of Movements

On the Lower Body

Basic Shimmy

- Starting in your Basic Pose, feet firmly grounded. Relax lower body, strong thighs, soft and released knees. Weight evenly distributed on both feet, and based in the centre of your soles.
- Push right knee forward.
- Then pull right knee back in and push left forward. Basically, you perform a succession of small Basic Lifts & Drops.
- Keep this going; keep the movements small in size and medium speed.
- Use your knees and thighs. Speed up when you feel ready.
- Keep knees released and soft.
- Breathe! Relax your mind.
- Keep upper body steady, no bopping up and down. Also, stay centered over your pelvis, do not lean forward into the balls of your feet, or back into your heels.
- Keep this up until the shimmy vibrates through your bottom and thighs. Keep knees soft.
- Relax everything: your knees, bottom, thighs, hands, jaw, and eyes.
- **IMPORTANT NOTE:** You must breathe with the shimmy, as it tends to stop ones breathing. If your shimmy gets locked, it's probably because you have stopped breathing.

The shimmy will take time and practice to build up the necessary muscles and technique to keep it both strong and lasting yet feminine and soft at the same time. The most beautiful hip shimmies are sensual, seemingly effortless and flowing. In the beginning, don't worry if your shimmy is jerky that's normal, so just keep practicing.

The shimmy uses a part of the body that can be blocked energetically. If you feel it is jarred do not be disheartened. It took me seven years to feel a joyful shimmy, as my hips were so locked and my pelvis so rigid. Women's bottoms and thighs are unfortunately open to ridicule in our societies, and can hold a lot of shame. Imagine this as a course in reclaiming that part of you, your pelvis and the seat of your sexuality. If you have difficulty with the shimmy just know that by practicing shimmying you are opening up a flower, and the petals will unfold in their own sweet time.

Once you've got the basic shimmy, you can start to learn the variations in your Intermediate course:

- Big, village style shimmy with bent knees. More in the buttocks.
- Flutter shimmy; with straighter knees and smaller knee movement.
- On one leg; moving weight into one leg.
- Pummelling shimmy; pummelling feet into the ground and alternating shifting weight between them.

On the Upper Body

Shoulder Shimmy

- Imagine your spine right behind your heart. Imagine this section of your spine rotating around itself to the right, then the left, and repeating in this motion.
- You can also use the muscles that run down the outer sides of your breasts to help in generating this motion.
- Generate the energy of the movement from the centre of your chest, from your core (remember the flag analogy).
- Don't be tempted to just push your shoulders and breasts forward and back, this is not a correct shoulder shimmy, and it looks and feels hollow to the viewer in comparison.

The correct shoulder shimmy will be juicy; as it will open your heart and channel its warm energy outward. The shoulder shimmy is traditionally used when two women dance together facing each other, and they alternate leaning toward and away from each other in unison; a beautiful sight to see. As with the shoulder roll, it is a movement that requires feeling and a sharing of a joyful moment. It is by no

means intended to be a breast thrusting or jiggling exercise! So please; keep it small, keep it coming from your heart, and feel the difference!

The Twist Family of Movements

On the Lower Body

Basic Hip Twist

- Assume Basic Pose with feet under hips etc.
- Shift your weight from foot to foot, straightening supporting leg and releasing the other. As you shift your weight keep your hips relatively level with the horizon, pelvis centred.
- Gently stomp a foot. As the weight is being shifted into it twist the corresponding hip from the back, to the front. As you get the hang of this, shift from a stomp to keeping the ball of your foot always on the ground, using it as an axis for the turning foot. This is important so that the working knee does not lock as you twist the working hip.
- Start off small, then speed up and get closer to the ground. Done fast and big it reminds us of African earthy moves that get the heart pumping.
Warning: Always keep your knees bent/released and working heel released to avoid knee injury. This movement can cause knee injury easily. Do it with care and supervision from your Belly Dance teacher.

Variations:

Practice small and isolated, then medium, then large and earthy.

Classical Hip Twist

- Take Classical Pose.
- Keeping your hips level with the horizon, pull your working hip back allowing your torso to face the far corner of the room at your 2 o'clock.
- Swing your working hip to the front, in a delicious swishy movement, holding at the end of the twist, to accent the movement and give it energy. Do four in quick succession for a yummy juicy movement. Hip Twists feel great as they massage our ovaries!
- Count 1, 2, 3, 4 with a slight kick "swoosh" of your working foot on the 2 and the 4, like you're lightly brushing the ground with the ball of your foot. Keep the ball of your working foot brushing the ground and not lifting off it too much, so you don't lose your groundedness.
- Use fast music to this; the twist is a juicy, exuberant movement that asks for joy or passion in the music.

Warning: Always keep your knees released and ball of working foot turning on the ground to avoid knee injury. If you lock your working foot into the ground it can injure your working knee.

On the Upper Body

Shoulder Twist

Gently push shoulder forward, then back, on the horizontal.

General Traveling Principle:

You will learn some basic travel steps in your Beginners Belly Dance Course. Allow your feet to fall into the Earth - pause there. Mother Earth then brings energy in through your feet to your center, your inner body, nourishing you. Imagine your body like a tree, your feet the roots that need to be in the earth connected to it, your body the trunk and the energy you give out from your heart through your hands and fingers are the fruit. With traveling, start small and slllllloooowwww. Take your time, feel your feet and feel the energy coming up through them.

The Circle Family of Movements

On the Lower Body

Basic Hip Circle

- Take the Basic Pose with your feet slightly apart.
- Imagine you are standing inside a cylinder that comes up to your hips. You are standing closer to the front of the cylinder than you are the back of it.
- Firmly ground your feet into the earth, and shift your weight to the side, like in a slide.
- Now start to clean the inside of the cylinder with your hip scarf, firstly pushing your hips to meet the back, and then round to the other side.
- When you come to the point of trying to clean the front section **keep your upper body over your knees, do not bend your back and thrust your pelvis forward**. This will create back injury for beginners. In this way, cut across the front section of the cylinder to get back to your starting point.
- Let the upper body move as it will, you are not a robot and do no need to keep everything stiff. Classical Middle Eastern Belly Dancers keep everything supple and flowing, allowing their energy to stay in flow around their body.

Classical Hip Circle

Same hip movement as the Basic Hip Circle, only it is done in the Classical Pose drawing a smaller circle around one working hip.

- Stand in Classical Pose.
- Imagine a small circle around the diameter of a dinner plate drawn around your working hip horizontally. You will try to trace around this circle with your hip.
- To do so, push your working hip a little bit forward shifting some weight into your working foot, then circle that hip around and out to the side, then back, then pull into your centre and connect your hip to your core.
- Keep circling this way, and keep an open connection between your hip and your heart, so that there is energy in your movement.

As in any Belly Dance movement there are variations based on the plane of movement and the direction of circle i.e.: you can draw a horizontal circle in two directions, clockwise and anti-clockwise, and you can draw a vertical circle to the front and to the back. Experiment and practice all the directions.

On the Mid Body

Chest Circle

- Trace the outline of a horizontal circle around your breast area - like a hula-hoop.
- You will need to have reached four points already with your rib cage to do the circle. These are the lift & drop points as in the Chest Lifts & Drops, and the right and left points as in the Chest Slides. The Chest Circle is just a smooth joining of these points.
- Can be tricky at first, but it does loosen the area up and becomes easier with time. The circular motion can be quite small but still effective.
- Use the puppeteer visualisation from the two groups of movements mentioned to help you with generating the movements.
- Chest movements open up the heart area, your emotional centre, which helps heal emotional disconnections.

On the Upper Body

Shoulder Roll (Shoulder Circle)

- A smooth roll of the shoulders forward and up, then down and back.
- Stand with one foot slightly in front of the other and relaxed.
- Draw a vertical circle with your shoulder by gently pressing it forward, bringing it up (without shrugging!), rolling it down and back.
- Do it on each shoulder individually, then start to alternate them. This is how the Shoulder Roll is done, never one on its own, always both shoulders alternating.

- I always tell my students that it is useless to do the shoulder roll without feeling and emotional expression. Wear your heart on your face when you do the shoulder roll! Melt, be soft, and send your love out. It is really a beautiful emotional move, so try not to be robotic about it.

Wrist Circles

- Hold your hands in front of you, palms down.
- Imagine you are holding soft fluffy balls in the palms of your hands.
- Keep your knuckles soft, and your fingers flowing and lengthened - beware the chicken claw! Refer to correct Hand Pose.
- Drop fingers down first, by bending the wrists.
- Then circle them upwards and around, then down again.

“Strength for her movements is picked up by the belly dancer from her belly - the lower part of her body where her balance is centred...even her finger movements draw their energy from her belly.”

***Rosina-Fawzia Al-Rawi From her book
“Belly Dancing - Unlock the Secret Power of an Ancient Dance”***

The Figure 8 Family of Movements

The Figure of Eight is so named because it looks like a number '8' on its side like this

∞. This symbol is also called a lemniscate, the mathematical symbol for 'eternity'. In ancient calligraphy it has been drawn as a snake with its tail in its mouth - a metaphor for the 'shedding of old skin' and the cyclical nature of life - also linked to woman's menstrual cycle and fertility. *Outward Figure 8 - Horizontal*

- On the horizontal - Imagine a number 8 on the floor, step one foot in each half.
- Begin to trace this eight with your hips, by sliding the hips diagonally to the right, weight in the ball of the right foot. Slowly continue tracing the ∞ by pushing the hip backward in a round motion, weight shifting into the right heel.
- Diagonally slide through the core of your belly, from the back right to the front left side of the ∞.
- Then continue tracing around the side and back of the left side and slide again back to your starting point.
- The aim is a smooth, flowing figure of ∞ - a gentle sway of the hips driven by the strength in the thighs and the relaxation of the knees, while the feet are kept flat and grounded. Relax our navel through all of this.

Inward Figure 8 - Horizontal

- On the horizontal - same technique as above, just starting the flow going backwards, and then scooping from back to front when turning the sides of the ∞ .
- To twist the hips from back to front, you must first take the weight of the move into the right heel. Turning the ball of the working foot in by lightly releasing the heel off the ground (do not lift the heel! Keep it brushing the ground), twist the hip forward shifting the weight into the front of the right foot, turning the foot and the hip inward.
- Transfer the weight from the ball of the right foot to the heel of the left foot and slide your hips diagonally moving through your core.
- Turn the ball of the left foot and hip inward again. When the movement gains momentum, you feel the hips gently twisting inward from the lower torso, heels brushing the floor when needed.

Belly Dance Principle:

Move from your centre, from your core. Remember the flag analogy; a small movement of the pole generating from the base of the pole creates a large visible movement of the flag at the other end of the pole. What people see is the flag, but the energy comes from its base, invisible but very perceptible. Draw your energy from your belly, from your base!

The Maya - Vertical

"Maya" is the Egyptian word for "water", which makes complete sense when you see this movement done well! It is a fluid, flowy movement that channels a woman's energy from her belly in a very warm and sensuous fashion. On the vertical plane, draw a lemniscate ∞ with your hips.

- With your feet hip width apart in the Basic Pose, and your knees well bent...
- Lift your right hip up, and outward to the side then downward - shifting your weight to your right foot.
- As your right hip goes down, your left hip goes up then outward to the side and downward.
- Keep your feet flat at all times, really extending the hips. If you lift your heels it will ruin the structure and form of the movement.

It is a difficult move that takes time and practice, but well worth the effort for its mesmerising beauty! I usually teach the Vertical Figure 8's to my Intermediate students.

Upward Figure 8 - Vertical

The opposite of the Maya, it scoop downwards first then upwards and in to your core.

- Standing in the Basic Pose, feet under hips.
- Drop your right hip down first, then scoop it up and out to the side slightly in a round motion.
- Start pulling it into your core, your centre, with the intention of shifting the movement to your left hip, which should be in a drop, balancing out the right hip that is now in a lift position.
- Make the move small and isolated, bending your knees to move up and down on the vertical allowing space to give the movement motion. Again, try to keep heels on ground.

The Undulations Family of Movements

Body Undulations

A snaky wave that travels down or up the body. Very sensual and fluid, the undulation suits flowing music and Taqsim. Undulations take time and flexibility, so I usually teach them to my Intermediate students.

Downward Undulation

- Take the Classical Pose, with working arm down by side.
- Sway chest forward; keep it small no need to try too hard. Sway weight forward a little into working foot (front foot).
- Pull back in, and in doing so, push the movement down to the belly.
- This will push your hips to the front, also a small move, and then sway them back and.....
-finish off with a sitting movement. Imagine a pin pushing down into the navel, diagonally pushing the pelvis down into a sitting position. Think of a pin-cushion.
- Repeat pushing the chest forward then pulling back, then swaying hips forward then pulling them back and continue....chest out, in....hips out, in....chest out, in....hips out, in....and so on.
- IMPROTANT NOTE: Frame this movement with your arms; supporting arm up in the air behind you, working arm down by the side of the hip that is closest to the audience. You MUST stand on the diagonal with the undulation as the wave is happening up and down your body, the audience won't see it if you stand squarely facing them. You need to stand side-ways so they can see the movement.

An Upward Undulation is the reverse of this movement, starting at the pelvis and sending the wave up to the chest. Also an Intermediate level movement.

Undulating Arms (known as Snake Arms)

- Stand in the Basic Pose or Classical Pose.
- Arms stretched out to the sides, soft elbows pointing softly to the back, and hands in pose.
- Start with a contained shoulder roll with the right shoulder.
- Then imagine a puppeteer pulling the right elbow upwards.
- Let the movement generated by the shoulder roll and the elbow moving up travel across and down the arm to the fingers.
- The shoulder roll will have moved to the back, and the elbow comes down. Lift the wrist to complete the wave and finish off with live fingers.
- Think of it like this: Shoulder - elbow - wrist - fingers. Shoulder - elbow - wrist - fingers. The puppeteer pulls each one up after the other, creating a snaky wave that travels from the shoulder to the fingertips.
- At this point, repeat this process on the left shoulder.
- The intention is to get a fluid alternating mirror image happening in both arms simultaneously.
- Keep your shoulders relaxed, and keep breathing! Keep everything stress free, learn to move without cramping your muscles, stay loose in your mind!

* * * * *

That does it for the core seven movement groups that make up Belly Dancing. Of course there are many more accents such as belly pops and pelvic tilts etc, but they do not belong to the seven main families of movements and are usually taught in later levels. Also, there are Belly Dance travel steps galore, but I will not cover these here. They are too difficult to explain only in writing, so you will have to ask your teacher to elaborate on the travel steps she chooses to teach you, and it helps to take your own notes in class to remember things at home.

The Emotional Aspects of Learning Belly Dance

What a Belly Dance course can bring up for a woman and how to overcome doubts and fears

I have been a Belly Dance teacher for many years now, and have seen how many of my beginner students come to class with a deep disconnection to their feminine body and the Feminine in general. In the West especially there is an epidemic rift between women and their femaleness. The reasons for this are based in the affects patriarchy has had on society over thousands of years. Many of the articles in www.ShemiranIbrahim.com will cover some aspect of this, such as [Empower the Feminine](#) and [Find Your Beauty through Belly Dance](#).

Many Beginner Belly Dance students leave prematurely because of the emotional journey Belly Dance can give rise to. Having said that this topic is seldom discussed. It is my hope that by opening this subject up you will know you're not alone. Also, I hope that this will help you ride any challenging emotions until you find the treasures that lie beyond them; the gems that hide deep inside your beautiful, luscious, creative and powerful feminine soul.

“Through dancing people understand their feelings. Through the movement of the body the heart opens”.

*Rosina-Fawzia Al-Rawi from her book
“Belly Dancing - Unlock the Secret Power of an Ancient Dance”*

The movements of Belly Dance can awaken many latent emotions that are linked to our body. When Beginner Belly Dance students start classes, they have a lot to deal with. Not only are they plunged into a whole new world of movement and music, but they also start to move parts of their female body that they are neither used to moving, nor are they necessarily comfortable with even the idea of moving.

Body image cultivated through the media, and the resulting social beliefs about what a female body “should” look like pervade our thoughts more than we'd like to admit even to ourselves. In the West especially, women's breasts, bellies, thighs, hips and bottoms become a major source of mass scorn that ultimately leads to private humiliation. When a Beginner Belly Dance student starts moving the offending body parts, many deep seated emotions can start to surface such as fear, shame, self-loathing and anger.

When strong emotions arise it can be difficult not to react to them. Some students may find it too much and leave the course mid-term. Others may be more aware of what is happening and work through the fear. Self-knowledge is the key in such circumstances, so attention to yourself and what is coming up for you is the first step in pushing through limiting, sometimes debilitating, feelings.

Some of the common thoughts and feelings that come up in class are:

I'm not good enough

I'm useless, I can't do this movement

Look at that woman, why can't I move like that

My bum is too big, I'm ashamed to move it in public

My breasts are too small, I don't look good

I'm too short; I wish my legs went on forever

I can't move my rib cage at all, jeez I'm not good that this....

Some feelings are less articulate. You may simply feel horrid in class and not really know why. When I started Belly Dance classes I was so fearful of the Feminine in general that I felt sheer terror in class for a very long time. I really didn't know or understand what was happening at the time, but luckily I was self-aware enough not to run out the door and never return. I am very thankful for that; if I had reacted to my fear I would have missed out on all the gifts this dance has to offer. Reacting to fight or flight seldom really gives us an outcome we truly care for, unless of course it is a life-saving response such as getting out of the way of an oncoming car.

If you become aware of negative thoughts and feelings challenging you in class, it is useful to start a journal and write them down; this will help you get perspective and clarity on yourself. I repeatedly ask my students to become aware of what is coming up for them, and NOT REACT TO THE LIES. Just know that the mind will bring up things from the past all the time, but we choose whether or not we focus on them. Personal choice is the tool, and a decision made within yourself to help yourself is of utmost importance. The price may be to endure a certain level of discomfort, but that is the journey of a woman who is finding her true self. When fear stares us in the face, our only real option is to pick up our sword and slay a dragon. Any other action leaves us feeling smaller than we really are.

When fear stares us in the face, our only real option is to pick up our sword and slay a dragon. Any other action leaves us feeling smaller than we really are.

At the time of writing this I have been in professional Belly Dance training for eight years. It has seriously taken me up to last year to conquer my fear of the shimmy. Now I can actually have a smooth and balanced out shimmy for longer, and I have the ability to flick the switch in my head that had stopped me from enjoying a free shimmy for such a long time. It only took seven years! My hips were so locked, and my pelvis carried so much shame.

As a teacher of Belly Dance I see these switches or fuses go off in students' heads all the time. Whether you are a student or a teacher, it is useful to understand that each woman has a different relationship to her body in general, and to the different parts of her body as well. Some students will happily shake their bottom and thighs for the entire world to see, but will have trouble expressing emotion through their face and upper body. Other women will have locked hips and blockages around the pelvic area, while feeling much more comfortable using their arms, hands and face for the emotional expression of the music.

Stiffness around a movement is a messenger not to be judged by the teacher, other students or even ourselves. It is trying to tell you something and the most useful line of action is to be present with it, and feel whatever emotions that it gives rise to. Emotional blocks can stiffen the muscles and joints in the area that is being challenged. Breathe through the fear and other emotions that come up. Also, just knowing this information will help you be stronger in those moments.

Also, when in class make your first and foremost focus to have fun, and that will energise you through any negative thoughts and feelings. Becoming aware of what's going on in your mind is empowering because only then does it lose its hold on you. Any journey will have dark places that need shining a light on, so too is a woman's journey into herself; a journey which Belly Dance facilitates naturally. The upside as always is more joy that we are able to feel because of our discoveries.

“Dancing is an element that heightens life and a feeling of wholeness. Belly dancing leads to the deep dark cave, to the centre of the earth, before flying, in all its pride and life-force, up to the light, to inspiration, and to new awareness”.

***Rosina-Fawzia Al-Rawi from her book
“Belly Dancing - Unlock the Secret Power of an Ancient Dance”***

Intro to the Different Styles of Belly Dance

A basic introduction to some of the styles of Middle Eastern Dance

All illustrations by Tatjana (see article footer for her details)

Classical Belly Dancing

An exact history of Belly Dance is not written. There are a few schools of thought as to what its true origins are. The modern Classical form is also known as "Classical Dance Orientale". It connects with the more spiritual heavenly side of the dance. One account of its history says that it originated in Baghdad Iraq, in the "Caliphates" cities known as Mesopotamia "The Land Between the Two Rivers" or "The Cradle of Civilization". It was created for the entertainment of royalty, especially the women of the Royal families, and the first recorded pictures of it date back to the 16th century. The intention of this dance was not to entertain with sexuality, as it was done in a theatrical setting for big gatherings of only women; so much so, that even the musicians were blindfolded.



It is a very pure form of Belly Dance marked by movements that are softer and smaller, closer to the dancer's centre, and the feet just up on the balls, heels closer to the ground. It uses the upper body and head a lot, connecting the dancer with the heavens, the spiritual energy of the dance.

What is generally referred to as Classical these days is Belly Dancing done to the older songs from the greats of Middle Eastern song such as Um Kulthum or Abdel Halim Hafez or Fareed Al-Atrash. Classical costuming is a full circular skirt with bra and belt. The Classical form is the basis for the "Cabaret Belly Dance" form, which is used more commonly today.

Cabaret Belly Dancing

The modern form of Belly Dance. It is the style you would see today in a restaurant, nightclubs and other entertainment venues. This style draws on the Classical movements, but tends to make them bigger, bolder, brasher, and higher on the balls of the feet.



The intention of the Cabaret dancer is very different as well. It is of entertainment and wow factor. It is cheeky and flashy, and so are the costumes. Bearing more flesh with an intensely beaded bra which is heavily beaded and ornate to match the belt that sits on the hips, with a straight skirt underneath, or a slimmer more tapered one.



More recently the skirts do not have a belt, instead they are skin hugging lycra tubes with slits up to the thighs, and are heavily beaded. This can also be a lycra dress with heavy beading around the bra and hips. In modern Cabaret dancers usually wear heeled dance shoes. This style of dance and costume only came about after Hollywood exploited Arabic dance with Western fantasies of it. Cabaret is also known as "Raqs Sharqi". In Arabic this literally translates to "Eastern dance".

"Taqsim" or "Taksim"

Plural is "*Taqasim*". An Arabic word that means division, and refers to a melody instrument improvising a solo section of a song, sometimes without any drums or other rhythm instruments. The Taqsim is the emotional, fluid, slow hypnotic part of Belly Dancing that is never choreographed. It is the dancer's chance to express her heart. Taqsim is where the Goddess resides. Read all about Taqsim and Improvisation at www.ShemiranIbrahim.com under Articles & Resources / Belly Dance General / Secrets of Improvisation in Belly Dance P1 & P2 .

"Baladi"

"Baladi" means "of the country" or village. The Baladi form of Belly Dancing is performed in villages and countryside around Egypt, where women danced together and entertained each other in family and community gatherings. It is a very earthy style of Belly Dance, done on flat bare feet and very grounded. The costuming is in full dress, no bare bellies. Much of the movement is centred in the hips. Arms should be held casually and elbows heavy. There is a proud energy to the dancer.

Dancing with a Veil



The veil dance uses a piece of chiffon or another soft floating material, not to be confused with the Arabic veil some Muslim women wear over their heads. What we call the Veil Dance in the West uses this piece of fabric, usually a rectangle, half circle or two half circles attached to create a wing shape. Double veil dancing is also becoming popular. The dancer incorporates the veil into the dance, resulting in a sensuous, evocative and dreamy experience. The veil reveals and conceals the dancer as it moves, which adds to the whole mystique and femininity of the performance. Egyptian dancers don't usually use the veil beyond their entrance.

Cane Dance - "Raqs al Assaya"

This is the Arabic term for the cane dance. This dance originated in southern Egypt, in the region known as Al Saiid. Traditionally in the Saiid, men carried long sticks with them which they used as weapons, and eventually they evolved a dance in which they feigned fighting with these sticks.

Women then began dancing with canes as a way of playfully imitating this men's dance, and eventually Raqs al Assaya developed into a distinct woman's dance. A modernized entertaining version is frequently used in Cabaret shows. The original Saiidi dance is danced in a full dress, with belly covered up.



Sword Belly Dancing - "Raqs al Saif"

Again mainly done in the West in modern times, the sword is used as a prop in Belly Dancing. There is a tale about the history of dancing with the sword that says it started out with dancing women who were slaves balancing the sword on their heads while dancing with their hips in a symbolic statement of independence that said "you may hold a sword over my head, but I am free in my soul".

Sword dancing is an advanced form requiring much precision, balance and centredness. Strong back muscles are used for floor work while the sword balances on the head, or the sword is balanced on the hip while doing hip drops, or the sword is twirled in the hand as is done with the stick when used with faster music.



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There are many other forms of Belly Dance, especially as the West has fused other forms and branched new forms out of the old, such as Tribal Belly Dancing which has taken the West by storm. As well, there are other forms that come from the Middle East such as the Zaar and dancing with zills etc. The above list is a basic introduction for students.

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All the beautiful illustrations of belly dancers above are by German artist and belly dancer Tatjana. Find her work at

<http://www.geocities.com/SoHo/Village/4060/index2.html>



Social Traditions & Ritualistic Uses of Belly Dancing in the Middle East

I find it important to clarify to my Western students some cultural aspects of Belly Dance in the Middle East. "Belly dancing is for men's entertainment" is a Western misconception that I like to dispel from the first class of their Beginners course, to allow them to feel the fullness of what they are learning, and sink into a more self-nurturing space with learning their craft.

Social Traditions

In traditional Arabia, women dance when they are together with other women, for the fun of it, for the expression of joy. It is totally approved of when women are amongst themselves. Grabbing a scarf and wrapping it around her hips, the Arabic woman will start dancing naturally to music on the radio or TV or to singing and clapping from her female family and friends.

In this tradition girls learn from their mothers and grandmothers, which puts them in good stead to grow into women as their bellies and pelvic areas have been well tuned for motherhood and general feminine health. After leaving a gathering, women feel uplifted physically, emotionally, socially and spiritually. It is a natural way of releasing stress and staying healthy on all levels.

Dancing for men's entertainment is not the origins of Belly Dance. Dancing in front of men is considered shameful in some sectors of Middle Eastern society. Professional dancers are usually looked down upon, unless they are famous, in which case they are idolised; a double standard but true nonetheless.

Ritualistic Uses

In Arabia (Arabic countries of the Middle East and North Africa), Belly Dance has been used throughout generations for marking the ceremonies of life and celebrating community.

Weddings:

Belly Dance features in every wedding. Not only does a professional belly dancer entertain the guests, but also the women and men of the two families would enjoy a dance together as well.

Births:

It was used as a tool in aiding natural child birth - in the Bedouins (nomads of the desert) the mother-to-be is surrounded by the women of the tribe all standing in a

circle around her, with two women standing by her side holding her up and helping her. All the women would chant and sing, and undulate and use gentle circular movements to encourage the birthing mother to do the same. These movements help ease the pain and go naturally with the movement of the child down and out into the world. For more information on how to use Belly Dance in natural birth read *Belly Dance for Birth* by Maha Al-Musa.

Trance & Spirituality:

Arabic Dance has many forms, and one is the Trance Dance (The Zaar), used to connect with the Devine or heal a person on a spiritual or psychological level.

Rite of Passage:

Traditional families will celebrate the flow of blood of a newly menstruating young woman, and will get her to dance her first dance as a woman. This happens in the gatherings of the women of the tribe only; the men do not belong in such celebrations.

You will not see Belly Dancing done in the Middle East without women making a loud shrill joyous sound with their mouths called a "*zaghroota*", plural "*zaghareet*". An Arabic word for the high-pitched sound made by moving the tongue quickly up and down inside the mouth. It is a sound made by the women on the Middle East when celebrating. It is heard commonly at weddings, birthdays, announcements of good news and simply a joyful moment in gatherings. In Belly Dancing it is used to express joy at a sister dancer's beauty when dancing or the dancer herself will do a "*zaghroota*" to let out the fun and joy she is feeling in the moment.

Ten Tips for Belly Dance Students

Simple tips to make your Belly Dance learning fun & get more out of every class

1. Breathe & feel the moment

Breathe through the movement; keep your attention in your feet, your belly, your pelvis and your breath. Stay in the moment by living in your belly and pelvis, feeling your feet on the ground and sensing your breath flow past your nostrils and your lips.

2. Part your lips sensually

Don't clench your jaw or your mouth, stay loose. This will also help you to breathe out of your mouth and in through your nose, allowing for a bigger exhalation through the mouth and a deeper inhalation - refilling and re-energising your every move. Also, keep your tongue connected to the roof of your mouth; according to ancient Taoism, this keeps your energy flowing up and down your body. Try it especially when you are feeling blocked.

3. Relax

Think loosey goosey! Watch yourself in your body; are you tensing up all the time? If you're not having fun in class you're missing the whole point. If you stress in your mind you will tense up in your body. Make joy your first focus and some magic will then happen with your movement; it will flow easier and feel better. Beautiful Belly Dance not only looks good, it feels good.

4. Watch your mind

Start challenging your negative self-talk. This is a key to open up a door to your true feminine beauty. Read the **Emotional Aspects of Learning Belly Dance** in this Student Guide to help you on your learning journey.

5. Dance without ambition or competition

As Rosina-Fawzia Al-Rawi says in her illuminating and heart warming book **Belly Dancing; Unlock the secret power of an ancient dance; "Dance without ambition or competition"**. Judgment of self and others is such a joy killer. If these thoughts come up for you, pay no attention and shift your focus onto better things, like how it feels to have your feet on the ground, are you holding your posture up correctly, or simply listen to the music and lose yourself in it.

6. Create community

Make friends, don't isolate yourself in class. Get to know like-spirited women from your community. This will bring bigger meaning to your dance.

7. Dress up

Buy some affordable jewellery to compliment your hip scarf, or a flowing gypsy skirt and any other additions that will add colour and spice and increase your interest. Costuming is a big part of the Belly Dance experience. Feel like a little girl again! Please note that if you wear skirts to tuck them into your waistband so that your teacher can still see your knees and feet; the base of all your movements!

8. Really learn the feet, they are your foundation

Don't brush over the feet as unimportant. They are your very foundation on top of which your hips and whole body depend, like the base of a pyramid holding up the entire structure. Feel the earth with your feet, live in your feet.

9. Ask questions

Don't be afraid to ask questions of your teacher, it always serves everyone. And remember, you are a paying customer!

10. Soak in Arabic music

Get into the music, buy CD's and listen to them all week. As a beginner, start with slower rhythms, then graduate to the faster tracks.

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Belly Dance opens a flower in the Heart, and lights a fire in the Belly.

Happy dancing!

Shemiran Ibrahim

www.ShemiranIbrahim.com

Belly Dance, Womanhood and everything in between