

## *One Teacher's Opinion: Sliding Scale Fees for Classes*

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A long-time dancer, gymnast, and yogini, Tava discovered Middle-Eastern dance (bellydance) in 2000, and she has been a devoted student ever since. Tava teaches and performs in Connecticut and New York.

As a member of Andrea Anwar's dance troupe "Raqesat el-Yaqoot," (The Dancing Rubies), she has appeared on television and performed at numerous cultural events. Audiences have described Tava's dancing as soulful, playful, and contagious. Visit her Web site at [www.reikiarts.com](http://www.reikiarts.com).



Photo: Sarah Skinner

by Tava Auslan

As a teacher, I often think about what it means to collect payment from my students. I am aware of the reality that I need to earn back the cost of renting studio space and be at least somewhat compensated for the time and energy I give to my students. Still, I find myself watching my group of delightful budding dancers and I cannot help but acknowledge that the \$15.00 means more to some than others. I have occasionally made allowances for students who are not in a position to afford regular classes, but where do we draw the line? How do we maintain consistency?

It is clear that some students view Middle-Eastern dance as a hobby or extracurricular activity. There is nothing wrong with this view, and I rather enjoy teaching people who never have any intention of performing or expanding their knowledge with workshops and reading, but who simply enjoy the movements of the dance. Others are so taken with the dance that it becomes more of a lifestyle that can border on an obsession. I don't mean obsession in the clinical sense, as if to imply that it is unhealthy, but in the way that something can swallow up your attention and transport you to a different world. Often times I am so captivated by the music and the dancing I feel "far away." When I see this in students, I am pleased to no end and do everything in my power to foster that feeling. I would hate to deny this sort of joy to a dancer who did not have the funds to support regular classes. But I am also aware of the need to maintain the standards of teaching. Is it fair to offer bartering or reduced cost to every student, regardless of their dedication to Middle-Eastern dance?

Drawing from my own experience in 2001, I was back in college with an unpaid internship and not enough time to earn a decent income. I somehow felt that dancing was the only thing keeping me sane and happy, particularly in the throes of post-9/11 grief. My teacher and mentor found clever ways to give me the chance to continue attending dance classes. I would mop the floors of the large studio for a free class, or babysit for a private lesson. Once I began to work full-time, we stopped our barter arrangement and resumed traditional payment. My gratitude still runs deep for her generosity, and I would gladly offer similar arrangements today. Here are some of the factors I consider:

- Is this student's financial status likely to change any time soon?
- How long has she been studying middle eastern dance?
- Should the student and I agree on a set length of time that I will accept a reduced rate?
- What are acceptable forms of bartering?
- Can I accept a sliding scale fee, and on what conditions?
- How has this student demonstrated a commitment to the dance?

There is no one right answer; however, in my opinion a teacher needs to fully explore all options and come to a solution that acknowledges the importance of an exchange, without denying someone an opportunity to continue learning. I recently offered one class to a student at a significantly reduced rate, knowing she had lost her job, and thought she should come to a class as a "pick me up." The student responded by saying she would never forget my generosity, and she would save the offer for a day when she really felt down and needed the dance to be happy again. I can certainly empathize with that feeling. ☒