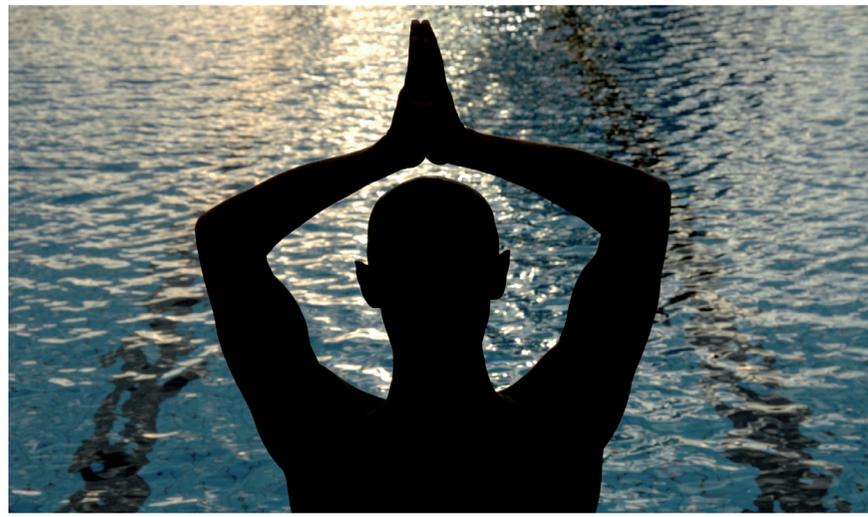


Zen SWIMMING

Roger Golten has invented a method of swimming that is kind to your body and graceful to watch. Sarah Warwick hit the water to find out more...



Sluttering up to the surface and peering up at my instructor through a curtain of waterlogged hair, I don't think I could feel any less Zen. My attempts to combine gliding in good postural alignment, gentle kicks and graceful arm movements, are less like a duck to water and more like a rock.

It's not that Zen Swimming is difficult – it seems simple enough when explained – but I'm having trouble getting it. I've come along in the hope he can help me, a keen swimmer, cope with recurring neck pain after swimming, but so far I've just tangled myself up in a knot.

Despite the name, Zen Swimming isn't a Buddhist practice. It is a meditative approach to the sport, but in a structural rather than spiritual sense of the word.

Invented by one Roger Golten from a combination of postural techniques, including the Shaw Method and Hellerwork, it has been likened to a water-based Alexander Technique. Golten's enlightened methods are revolutionizing a sport that almost everyone thinks they can do, but few do well.

"Ninety per cent of people swim badly," Roger tells me, as we have our first class together. "People think they know how to swim but they have bad habits."

Much of this is the fault of childhood teaching. "Most people have a vague memory of their swimming lessons," says Roger, "but they didn't learn much. Bad acoustics meant you couldn't hear the teacher, who was effectively just there to make sure you learned how not to drown. This means that 40 years later you're still not sure how it works."

Bad swimming can be responsible for back pain, joint damage and a variety of other

injuries. Golten's classes, which are held in the basement health centre of the Park Lane Marriot, teach a holistic method that avoids injury. "Here we teach in a way that's positively good for health," he tells me. "It's swimming for life."

So, what have we all been doing wrong? The short answer is lots of things. In my case – as with a lot of people – first on the list is swimming with my head out of the water. This, according to Roger, who has spent 10 years mastering his technique, is the swimming equivalent of "driving with the handbrake on". Apart from compressing your spine and damaging the neck and back, it slows you down in the water.

The basic move behind Zen swimming is a glide; nothing is forced. For this, the head, neck and shoulders should be in alignment, with the top of the head leading the way as if a string is pulling the top of your head towards the far wall of the pool.

"Good swimming is like being an arrow," Roger says. "The basic idea is that the head, neck and back should be in alignment, the rest is secondary. Like the head makes a hole in the water and the rest of the body follows through that hole – it's smooth, non-splash swimming."

Once a pupil has mastered the glide,

Roger helps them to work on the stroke of their choice. Rather than looking at their current stroke and correcting it, he teaches each stroke method from scratch. "When people struggle with swimming they tend to try harder but don't! Stop, take stock and try something different. Try to start again, imagining you know nothing."

I choose to re-learn front crawl, which – like many – I've always had trouble with. "People often struggle with crawl because they get tired by kicking their legs a lot, which is relatively inefficient," Roger explains. "Instead, front crawl should be 80 per cent arms, 20 per cent legs."

He shows me how the legs should be used mainly for buoyancy, while the speed comes from the way the body rolls from side to side, and the way the arms pull the body through the water. Roger's streamlined crawl makes a lot of sense. Instead of swimming with chest forward, as most of us were taught, the body rotates with each stroke, allowing it to move through the water on its side. This displaces less water so it's faster and more efficient.

"The main thing to get right is your body position in the water," he says. "Like aerodynamics, it makes much more of an impact if you're streamlined. More is less. The best swimming has fewer strokes – the more you relax and reach out, the more quickly you swim and with less effort."

Much as I like the sound of less effort, I don't make a brilliant start. I get to enjoy the glide – face down, breathing out constantly, standing up first and bringing my head up last – and my shoulders and neck don't feel the usual strain. But I can't get the hang of the twisting body movement, mixed with arm movements, and a gentler foot-movement.

By the seventh time I've got it wrong, I worry that Roger is feeling as un-Zen as me about it all, but like the good teacher he is, he shows patience and explains it again and again.

By the end of the class, I've made progress and have the basic building blocks of the stroke sorted. I feel that I'm on the way towards Roger's magic "Three Rs": "rhythm" "relaxation" "range of movement".



More information

Roger Golten's Zen Swimming classes are held by appointment at the Park Lane Marriot. An hour's lesson for one person costs £100, including full-day pass to Park Lane Health Club, for two people it's £60 each, three for £50 each, 4 (max) for £45 each. To book lessons, call or text Roger on 07956 514522.