

Yoga for Dancers—The Upper Spine

by Anna Rain

Most of us spend much of our day with the upper spine curved forward: computer work, driving, cooking, caring for (and carrying!) children. The dorsal spine, located in the stretch of the back between the shoulder blades, has a natural curve that goes toward the back body. To support that natural curve, we must learn to draw it forward, toward the chest. If we don't make an effort to support the dorsal spine, gravity draws the shoulders forward and the upper back collapses.

Increased flexibility of the upper back brings two immediate benefits: First, the chest opens and the rib cage is not compressed, which allows more space for the lungs to expand. Better breathing! More chance that each breath you take is used efficiently to deliver the fuel of oxygen to your dancing muscles! The second benefit to upper back mobility is better support to the low back. The low back is naturally more flexible and it tends to take the heat if the upper back isn't doing its share of supporting and aligning the body. Calling on the dorsal spine to bear the load for which it was designed can ease the ache of an overstressed lumbar spine.

Here is a restorative yoga pose that gently opens and supports the upper spine and releases the muscles surrounding the dorsal vertebrae. Start with a

firm woolen or Mexican woven blanket (towels and polyester blankets are not firm enough). Fold the blanket in quarters until it is a rectangle about two and a half feet by three and a half. From the shorter

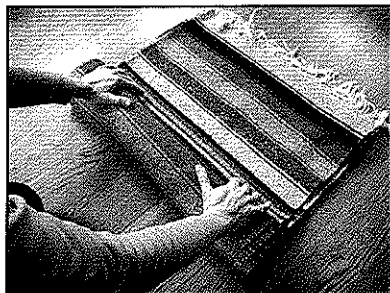


Figure 1

end, make a tight roll. How big the roll is depends on your comfort and flexibility. Start with a roll two and a half to three inches high and adjust as needed (see Figure 1).

Reach to your back and find the bottom tip of your shoulder blades. They are higher than you think—about nipple level. Now, sit on the floor in front of the roll, and lower yourself so that the bottom tip of the shoulder blades rest on the apex of the roll. You want to feel a slight challenge to the dorsal spine, one that opens the back and chest but that you can relax into after a minute or so. Adjust the roll smaller or bigger until you reach that balance of challenge and ease. Keep your knees bent and feet on the floor, and draw your buttock flesh toward your heels, especially if you tend to have lower back pain. (If it feels good, straighten the legs, stretch them well, then relax them completely.)

See that the back of your neck is long and that your head is not tipped way back. Lengthen the back of the neck, and perhaps even rest the back of the head on another folded blanket. Stretch the arms over the head, then let them relax, either in a diamond shape, in a "cactus" shape, or straight out from the shoulders. If your arms are not comfortable, support the bent elbows with small pillows or rolled towels so that you can release into the sensation of the roll in your dorsal spine (see Figure 2). You might feel a generous stretch in the front of the armpit-shoulder space. This is good! When the shoulders habitually roll forward, these pectoral muscles shorten and inhibit the full opening of the front body.

Stay in this passive backbend as long as you can rest comfortably, anywhere from two to ten minutes. The longer you are able to release and relax, the more your dorsal spine will extend and open, and the more you remind it to open, the more easily you will stand tall, lengthened and aligned.

To come out of the pose, straighten your legs and stretch from your heels through your fingernails. Bend your knees, and without lifting your head, roll to your right side. (Rolling to the right lets the heart be on the



Figure 2. Photos courtesy Anna Rain.

side that's up, which is more restful). Keep your neck soft and your head heavy and roll even more to your right, so that you're almost facing the floor. Use your right elbow and your left hand to press yourself up. Let your head roll gently upright to rest on top of your spine. Come up from the floor safely and evenly: tuck your toes under and roll up to standing. Stand tall with your feet parallel and hip-width apart and notice how the dorsal spine moves toward the front body with more ease.

This pose is a wonderful gift to give yourself every day. Resting with support under the dorsal spine is deeply relaxing and restorative to the nervous system. You'll gradually increase your dorsal flexibility and stand taller, which makes for ease and elegance in your dancing.

Next issue: Saving your knees!

Anna Rain is a certified Iyengar yoga instructor. She started contra dancing in the mid 1980s in her native Colorado and is a seasoned contra caller, a novice English caller, and she dances with Dread Pirate Rapper. Scottish, English and Norwegian are her current favorite genres, and she blows a collective hiss to all the excellent musicians who provide dancing music.