

Yoga for Dancers—Float the Floating Ribs and an Altar for the Heart

by Anna Rain

I wrote of *Lifting the Spine* a couple of years ago, and I find I often return to these concepts in my classes, searching for ever more evocative words to describe the actions I seek for my students to experience. We all know that each person absorbs a concept uniquely, and when a teacher has a variety of ways to explain a new thought, the chances increase of more people “getting it.”

For reference, you might revisit Fall 2009 “Align the Spine” and Summer 2014 “Why the Well-Lifted Spine?” in the newsletter archive at <http://www.cdss.org>. I welcome you to yet another conceptual approach to standing tall to create space between each vertebra.

In our habit stance, most of us roll the shoulders toward each other and tip the pelvis such that the top thighs push forward. In this space the upper spine overstretchs and loses the potential for mobility, while the spinal vertebrae of the low back compress, often causing pain. In this state, I imagine the spine as a beaded necklace lying in a jumbled heap on a table. To stretch the necklace out, pick up one end and see how each bead drops in line below the bead above it. Ideally, this necklace has a separator between each bead, which represents the discs that cushion the vertebrae. When we stand, we want our spine to extend freely, like the necklace suspended from your fingers, with space for the discs between each vertebra. If your spine is unaccustomed to looking for space between the bones, reversing this habit is the consistent work over many months.

In our culture, many of us seek to protect the heart physically by hiding it, by folding the shoulders in so we are less vulnerable. Many of us have had years of closing the chest—sometimes to make ourselves look smaller or thinner or less intimidating. Not only is our spine not well-served by this action, but on an energetic level, our heart is not out and open and available. For many of us, this is a measure of protection: “I won’t let you hurt my heart! To be vulnerable is to be weak!”

I propose that if we explore the physical actions of making space in the spine for each vertebra to be unencumbered and mobile, we also serve ourselves emotionally by providing support for the heart from

the back body. When the heart is supported and receives its protection from the length of the spine and the subtle forward action of the bottom of the shoulder blades, we are More Open both physically and emotionally.

Spine Long

Stand with your feet parallel and about 10 inches apart. Engage the quadriceps (See Spring 2013 “Cranky Knees and Long Quads”). Put the fingers of one hand on your tailbone and put the palm of the other hand on the top of your head. Find the spot on your head that feels warm, and center the palm on that place: this is the energetic crown of the head. Roll the shoulders back: if they swoop forward, the spine can’t find mobility. (Winter 2012-13 “Shoulders Back”).

With your fingers as a guide, extend the tailbone down, away from the waist and toward the floor. This is a subtle action (as opposed to a movement observable to another). Likewise, take the tailbone slightly in, toward the front body, and at the same time, see that the top thighs remain back. (Don’t let the tailbone-forward action disturb the top-thighs-back action!) Maintain these actions of the tailbone and take your attention to your palm on the crown of the head: from the tailbone, lengthen your spine up so much that you push the crown of your head into your hand. Observe how your spine feels: different, perhaps, from your normal standing? Can you take your mind-awareness to the place(s) in your spine that you might sense to have changed action?

Switch hands and perform the same actions. See that the shoulders roll back away from each other. Now maintain all those actions and take the arms by your side: Can you keep the spine as long as it was when you had your hands helping you? Can you imagine the vertebrae like beads in a necklace? Can you feel the spaces between the vertebrae?



To recap:

- Stand with the feet parallel and about 10 inches apart, heels slightly out
- Engage the quadriceps
- Lift the side ribs away from the waist
- Roll the shoulders back
- Place one hand on the tailbone; one hand on the crown of the head
- Take the tailbone down and slightly forward
- Keep the top front thighs back
- Extend the crown of the head up into the palm
- Switch hands
- Maintain actions and bring arms to your side

Shoulder Blades Down; Floating Ribs Up

In that shoulders-forward habit space, the shoulder blades tend to stick out. When we develop the capacity to “roll the shoulders back,” the shoulder blades have the opportunity to flatten against the back and move down—from the top of the shoulder blade to the bottom tip of the shoulder blade—and toward each other, toward the spine.

Once you are able to descend the shoulder blades, you also must lift the back low ribs, also called the floating ribs. Take them straight UP, away from the waist. (See that you do this without allowing the front low ribs to protrude). These two actions—shoulder blades down, floating ribs up—are tremendously healthy for the back body, and they are very challenging to engage simultaneously. The floating ribs are “false” ribs in that they attach to the spine but not to the sternum (breastbone). As you descend the shoulder blades, “float” the floating ribs up, toward the head. Bonus! Re-engage the extension up through the crown of the head and observe how your spine feels.

To recap:

- Roll the shoulders back
- Descend the shoulder blades from the top (near the neck) to the bottom (nearer the waist)
- Draw the shoulder blades in toward the spine and flatten them on the back
- Restrain the front low ribs; take them toward the back body
- Float the floating ribs toward the head
- Extend the crown of the head up (as if into your palm)

The practice of lengthening the spine and finding space between the vertebrae is exactly that: a practice. We do it again and again because performing the

actions only once gets us nowhere. We must engage and re-engage with the actions in order to effect change in the body.

An Altar for the Heart

Many of the physical actions are not movements. Don't expect to see large changes in the body immediately. These subtle actions may not initially seem doable. With practice, however, one becomes accustomed to the magical thinking in the body. “I imagine this can happen!” Small actions, with practice, make more space, which creates ease in the body; ease in the body brings focus and calm to the mind.

Once you have found the possibility of moving the shoulder blades down (while floating the back ribs up), add this concept: Tuck the bottom tip of the shoulder blades toward the front body, as if you could make a little shelf for the heart. Here is the support that will serve your heart—from behind—so that your front chest can be open and receiving and giving. Think of this shelf as an altar for your heart to rest on.

Making change—in our dwelling places, in our choices—is destabilizing and can make us feel vulnerable. Making change, however, is how we grow. Grow tall! Grow open! Allow yourself to be vulnerable and accessible to others by supporting yourself from within.

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Web Extra! Links to earlier “Yoga for Dancers” articles cited in this article will be on our website when this article is posted in early September, <http://www.cdss.org/programs/cdss-news-publications/cdss-news>.

