

# Yoga for Dancers—Abdominal Integrity, Part the Second

by Anna Rain

In every yoga pose we do, we seek the ultimate balance between stability and mobility. When we successfully achieve both to the extent we are capable, a radiance arises: the energy of the pose expresses itself and we receive the benefit thereof. As I wrote in the last column, the correct engagement of the arms and legs (firmness creates stability) allows the torso to lift and be long (from that firmness, we find mobility), which in turn, takes the abdomen to its proper alignment (radiance!).

When your abdomen is in the right place, it holds your front body together and it holds your back body together. If we attend to the limbs and the torso, the optimal action of the abdomen happens much more easily. If we neglect the arms, legs and torso, then trying to “pull” the abdomen in uses the muscles in a detrimental (not to mention difficult) way. The organs are bunched; the spine is distressed and compressed. No body parts are happy. The collective societal yearning for a “flat stomach” has caused us all to think that we can effect change by gripping in one place only, that so-called “core strength” comes from focus on the abdomen alone. The body is a community that needs all the members to contribute for optimal health, and the stability of correctly engaged arms and legs is the necessary first step to abdominal integrity.

This article’s pose uses arms and legs to bring mobility to the spine; those actions combine to position the abdomen in its optimal setting. Poses that give us experience with the abdomen correctly placed allow us to take that kinesthetic information and use it in our everyday movements of standing, walking and sitting.



First, find “external rotation” of the arms while standing (*CDSS News*, Spring 2010, “opening the shoulders”): stand with feet parallel, weight even on both feet. Rotate the arms entirely away from the mid-line of the body, turning the thumbs out as if you were hitch-hiking with both hands.

This is “external rotation,” and the

flexibility to do this easily is essential for healthy shoulder and spine function. As you rotate the arms externally, roll the shoulders back and draw the thoracic spine forward, toward the front body. From your work in lifting the spine (*CDSS News*, Summer 2014), you’ll remember—when standing—to keep the front low ribs subtly tucked in; don’t let them poke out or up.

## *Four-Footed Pose*

In this pose, the arms and the feet provide the stable base. From this grounding, the spine, through perseverance and practice, finds increased mobility and lifts ever more strongly from the floor. If you are used to slumping over a keyboard (of any type) or a steering wheel, moving the spine up and away from gravity is challenging! When the arms and legs give the pose structure, the muscles around the spine develop slowly but properly, which gives us more stamina to stand tall and straight.

Once the arms and legs are correctly positioned and the spine lifts, gravity fills in the last piece and lays the abdominal muscles perfectly against the back body. This sensation—of the abdomen effortlessly spread against the low back—is that radiance of harmony and balance of stability and mobility.



The pose is called the Four-Footed Pose because you stand on four feet: two of the feet are your feet; two of the feet are the back tips of your shoulders. Stand on all four feet, and lift your spine to the sky!

Adjust the arms properly: rock to your left side and roll the right shoulder slightly toward your ear, and then roll the outer upper arm toward the floor. Repeat for the left shoulder. See that the very top of the arm rotates out, toward the floor. This helps the thoracic spine (in between the shoulder blades) be able to move toward the front body. Holding a strap in your hands assists in the stability of the base of the pose.

When we stand, we generally want the trapezius—the muscle where someone might give us a shoulder rub—to be soft and gently (not

aggressively!) rolling toward the shoulder blades. When we're lying down, however, we want to adjust it more carefully: we want the muscle to be parallel to the wall behind us and not sloping away from our shoulders. If we pull the shoulders away from the ears, that hardens the trapezius, which is not the goal.

Adjust your thighs properly: the front thighs roll from the outside in; the top back thighs (just under the crease of the buttocks) open from the inside out. Correct thigh action assures that the low back is not compressed.

To come into the pose, exhale. As you inhale, coordinate the following actions: press down the outer upper arms; roll the front tips of the shoulders toward the floor; and lift the spine and shoulder blades away from the floor and toward the ceiling. In this pose, we do want to challenge gravity and move the whole rib cage—including the front low ribs—UP. Press the heels, press the inner and outer edges of the feet evenly, and lift the outer hips.

See that the buttock muscles are not clenched. When you do this pose, the buttock muscles are indeed engaged, but the engagement comes from the deep layers, not from hardening the muscles on the surface. To find correct action of the buttock muscles, see that the back thighs open from the inside out, and lengthen the flesh of the buttocks away from the waist. Notice the difference between gripping or clenching the buttocks (wrong) and lengthening the buttocks. Focus the lift of the pelvis on the outer hips and the tailbone.

- Lie on your back with your knees bent, your feet on the floor, and your heels a few inches from your buttock bones
- Turn your toes slightly in and take your heels slightly out; feet are about 8-10 inches apart
- Sweep the buttock flesh away from your waist
- Externally rotate the arms (palms up; outer upper arm rolls toward floor)
- (optional) Hold a strap in your hands to increase the grounding action
- Front thighs roll in; back thighs open from the inside out
- As you inhale, descend the front tips of the shoulders, press the arms down, and lift the spine and shoulder blades away from the floor
- Press the feet and lift the outer hips
- Continue the actions of the pose: press down; lift; notice that the abdomen drops into correct placement

When you've done the pose a number of times, lie flat on your back and rest for a few minutes. Roll to your side, drop your head, and press yourself up without lifting your head first. Keep your neck soft. Come to your hands and knees, tuck your toes under, and rock back on your both your feet evenly. Come to standing gently, and coordinate: your legs straighten while your hands come off the floor in a smooth motion that does not stress the knee joints.

Stand with your weight even on both feet. Engage the legs and arms as you did in the poses from the Summer 2015 CDSS newsletter: Lift the front thighs, roll the shoulders back, lengthen actively through your fingers, and draw the side waist and torso up. See if you feel the abdomen engaged in the same way it was in Four-Footed Pose: not clenched or gripped, but spread smoothly and effortlessly against the back body. This is another step toward more awareness of correct abdominal action. The more you can find that effortless place—where the abdomen is exactly where it needs to be—the easier it is to engage the muscles correctly and increase your abdominal integrity.

Students of yoga often ask: "How long should I hold a pose?" In the Iyengar tradition, we do not "hold" poses for a set time or for a certain number of breaths. We do seek to coordinate breath with action, and our breathing while in the pose is optimally smooth, soft, and rhythmic. As long as you can be in the pose with your attention on the actions of the pose, maintain it. When you find your mind slips away ("I wonder if this is long enough?" "How 'bout those Mets?"), come out of the pose, observe a few normal cycles of the breath, and attempt the pose again. See if you can move away from "X repetitions for X number of breaths" and be attentive and present to your experience in the pose, rather than what you think someone else thinks you should be doing.

*Anna Rain is a certified Iyengar Yoga instructor. She is deeply grateful for the entire CDSS community and the wondrous gifts of music, connection and personal growth its membership has brought her over the past several years. Happy Centennial, y'all!*

