

Yoga for Dancers—Krama: Small Actions, Big Results!

by Anna Rain

In the same way that we don't introduce contra corners or a full double figure eight at the beginning of an evening of dance, we don't immediately jump into complicated yoga poses without a mental and physical warming up. Krama is the Sanskrit word which means the careful, sequential ordering of correct action, and following this concept assures that the body learns safely and at an appropriate pace. Krama is practiced for the duration of a single pose, over the course of a multi-pose practice, and throughout one's lifetime of practice.

Every yoga pose has a unique role in one's practice, and each pose plays a part in encouraging the actions necessary to access more challenging poses. Until the body finds ease in these foundational poses, other poses remain out of reach.

Practicing with krama, in careful, attentive sequences, trains not only the body but also the mind: as you master the beginning actions of a pose, you hone observational skills that serve you as you progress to more complex and intertwined actions.

The first two phases of Gate pose prepares the body for the classic poses, and all three phases of Gate pose address essential actions that prepare the body for more complicated actions in other poses. The first phase connects the hip-opening thigh rotation that is so important for good leg and back function; the second phase encourages hamstring length and side body lift; the third phase (the classic pose) strongly stretches the side body (one side at a time) and revolves and strengthens the abdominal muscles.



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Gate Pose, phase 1

- Kneel on a folded mat or folded blanket (use enough padding that the knees aren't sensitive)
- See that the knees are about 10" apart
- Bring the hands to the waist, roll the shoulders and elbows back, and take a few breaths (*see photo 1*)
- Take the right leg out to the right at a 90 degree angle
- The right foot is under the right knee; the right foot is in line with the left knee
- Maintain weight directly over the left shin (don't lean either to the right or the left)
- With your right hand, rotate the muscles of the right thigh from the inner thigh to the outer thigh (*photo 2*), then
- Press the back of the right hand into the right thigh (*photo 3*)
- As you roll the thigh back (toward the wall behind you), move the right buttock bone forward (the direction your torso faces)
- With your left hand, move the abdomen from the right to the left
- Bring the right shin back to the floor, and
- Repeat on the second side, with weight on the right shin, taking the left leg to the left

If you are new to yoga poses, practice krama in your approach: do phase 1 over the course of several days—or weeks—before attempting phase 2. Understand the actions: external rotation of the thigh that is out to the side, buttock bone forward, abdomen rotates away from leg out to the side.

My students often ask me, "How long should I hold a pose?" Rather than thinking of counting seconds or breaths, I advise: First, if the pose has two sides, stay in the pose on each side about the same amount of time. Second, stay in the pose for as long as you are truly in the pose. Once you notice that your mind strays to an unrelated thought, you're not in the pose any more, and you should come out. Refocus, then attempt the pose again.

Gate Pose, phase 2

- Follow the sequence of phase 1
- Straighten the right leg (*photo 4*)
- Maintain weight on the left shin
- Align right foot with left knee
- Roll the right thigh back and the right buttock bone forward
- Extend both arms, palms up
- Recall the abdominal action: move the abdomen from right to left
- Press the left shin down, stretch the arms, and lift the waist evenly on both sides
- Return the right leg first to 90 degree angle, then bring the right shin to the floor, and
- Repeat on the left side, with weight on the right shin

I was in Pune, India, in November, studying at the Iyengar Institute there (RIMYI). A quotation from Prashant Iyengar during one of the classes has lingered with me, and I find that the concept applies to my dancing and musical lives, as well as in my yoga practice:

“It is better to do a small action and have something big happen than to do a big action and have only a small thing happen.”

Prashant’s idea echoes krama: proceed with focus. Move in small ways and be attentive to what happens as a result of those small movements. How precise can we be? What glorious big results might come of our fine-tuned adjustments?

This is not to say that we should avoid risk. What musician has ever been satisfied with a performance that didn’t include a bold choice of interpretation or improvisation? As a dancer, how would you know if you could make your loop bigger and still arrive on time for the next figure without a little pushing of boundaries? We can, however, explore the intricacies of small actions in a way that is innovative, creative, and supportive to our art.

The common thread between krama and small actions is focus and attention. Proceed sensitively, gaining understanding of foundational actions before moving on to more complicated concepts. Be sensitive to the small actions and what bigger effects they might have.

Once you have practiced—attentively!—the second phase of Gate pose several distinct times, observing how small actions contribute to more focused awareness on your part, move on to phase 3.

Gate Pose, phase 3

- Follow the sequence of phases 1 and 2
- Inhale, lift the chest, and extend the arms
 - As you exhale, bring the back of the right hand to the right shin (*photo 5*)
 - Maintain weight on the left shin
 - Inhale and extend from the left shin through the left fingers, then
 - Exhale and turn your torso from the right to the left; turn toward the ceiling
 - Again, inhale and extend from the left shin through the left fingers, then
 - Exhale and take the left fingers closer to the right toes (this is the “gate” closing!) (*photo 6*)
 - To come up, swing the left arm and bring the torso upright
 - Take a few breaths, then return the right leg first to 90 degree angle, then bring the right shin to the floor, and
 - Repeat on the left side, with weight on the right shin

Attentive, gentle repetition to the small actions in sequential phases of Gate pose serve krama and serve your expanding understanding in your body. The focus and dedication you bring to your practice will benefit not only your physical self but will also deepen your sensitivity to the small actions that can bring big results.

Anna Rain is a certified Iyengar yoga instructor. She’ll also be leading English country dance and contra at CDSS English Week at Pinewoods this summer. Anna’s current dance favorites are Under the Influence, by Jenna Simpson, to the tune Tom Kruskal’s by Amelia Mason and Emily Troll, and the Scottish Country dance, The Braes of Breadalbane.



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