

Yoga for Dancers—Keep Practicing: Release Attachment to Immediate Results

by Anna Rain

In yoga philosophy, the balancing concepts of *abhyasa* and *vairagya* guide one's practice. From the Sanskrit, *abhyasa* is translated as continued practice; I tell my students it means "Do a pose (or two!) every day." *Vairagya* has several layers of meaning, the most basic being "detachment from perceived outcome." I've had the experience more times than I can say of being frustrated by a pose (or a situation in my life...), and I give up on being able to change where I am. At the same time, however, I continue to practice (or do whatever good work I am committed to doing), and months later, when I've forgotten my attachment to the pose or the situation, I find that suddenly, the capacity to do the pose or to be comfortable in the situation is miraculously within my grasp!

Engagement of both concepts is vital: if I practice faithfully but am attached to a particular outcome, success is elusive; if I am a star at detachment (the negative aspect of which is "not caring") but am not faithful in my practice, I'll get nowhere. B.K.S. Iyengar likens these ideas to the two wings of a bird. One cannot fly with only one wing.

In your quest to open the shoulders and give more space to the breath (see the last article, "Open the Shoulders, Open the Breath," Fall 2014), I give you another pose with which you can practice *abhyasa* and *vairagya*. Results may come slowly: resist discouragement and commit yourself to the precise actions described. Daily attentive practice will bring remarkable benefits in the future.

Interlocked Hands with Arms Overhead

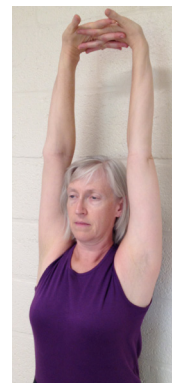
This pose helps open the shoulders and is beneficial to the hands. Be patient with yourself. If you have stiff hands or stiff shoulders, this may feel challenging. If you work at a desk, focused on a computer for hours each day, I can tell you now that your body wants this pose. When you take breaks

from your desk, this is an excellent pose to counteract the computer hunch that most of us have when we work on a screen. Doing this pose attentively and regularly will, in time, bring you results.

- Interlock your hands, taking note of which thumb is on top [*far left photo*]
- Turn your hands so your palms are opened away from you
- Straighten your arms in front of you
- Press your fingers into the backs of your hands so that the palms are as flat as possible [*center left*]
- Rotate externally the inner upper arms UP (biceps roll from the inner arm up and over to the outer arm)
- Take the arms overhead, and make the arms as straight as possible [*center right*]
- Maintain the rotation of the inner upper arm (with arms up, the inner upper arm—near your ear—rolls back, toward the wall behind you) [*far right*]
- Press toward the ceiling with your flat palms
- Keep the shoulders away from the ears
- Aim to bring the arms vertical, in line with the body (this takes time!)

When you achieve correct action with the arms, you may feel your thoracic spine (in-between the shoulder blades) resisting. This is common: the thoracic spine is the stiffest part of the spine, and your arm action offers you the opportunity to draw those vertebrae into more perfect alignment. Take your intelligence there, move the thoracic spine in (toward the front body) and up, and re-energize the arms.

After doing the pose on the first side, bring your



arms down, bring the palms together, switch the interlock of your fingers (with the other thumb on top—this will feel like the “wrong” way), and repeat all actions on the other side.

If your hands are particularly stiff, help them open this way. Follow the first four steps above, then:

- Press the palms into a wall in front of you
- Spread the palms, pressing the entire circumference of the palm into the wall
- Lift the inner upper arms
- Roll the shoulders back (don't let them tip toward the wall)
- Draw the spine up
- Do on both sides (switch the interlock of the fingers for second side)

Now re-establish the long tall spine—as you did the previous pose, your front ribs may have poked out and your back body shortened around the waist. Do the pose again, and this time, see if you can maintain your well-lifted rib cage. Notice that you may be able to straighten your arms OR keep your spine long: doing both actions at once seems impossible. Again, be gentle with yourself. Try letting go a bit of one action, establishing the other, and then see if you can regain the first. Example:

- Be in the pose, with palms to ceiling and arms fully extended
- Observe the torso: is it long and lifted? Or has it shortened, possibly in the back body?
- Bend the arms slightly to release them, then
- Draw the side body and back body up, away from the waist
- Slide the shoulder blades toward each other, and THEN
- Maintain all these actions and re-straighten the arms

...or the converse:

- Be in the pose with arms fully extended
- Release the spine slightly, then
- See if you can deepen the rotation of the inner upper arm as you tighten the elbows, THEN
- Maintain those actions of the arm and re-lift the spine

Daily practice of shoulder opening—with the necessary attention to keeping the spine lifted and tall—will make your shoulders resilient. Over time, with dedicated practice, you'll develop the habit of rolling the shoulders back (seeing that the front ribs do not incorrectly compensate by poking forward).

After some weeks or months of practicing both the lying-down shoulder opener (see Fall 2014) and the interlocked-fingers pose, you'll correct the over-stretched trapezius (the muscle that receives a shoulder rub) back into its structurally supportive position. The pectoral muscles—in the front armpit—will also expand and become more supple. Flexible shoulder joints are a boon to dancers and musicians alike: the work we do in opening our own body (*abhyasa*) brings results down the road (*vairagya*): we are less likely to be injured by repetitive musical practice or by an errant twirl from a fellow dancer.

Eventually, when the shoulders are comfortably back and down and the spine is long and lifted, you'll have created the optimal structure (the hardware, if you will; see Fall 2014) for supporting the broadening of the rib cage, which then welcomes the gentle deepening of the breath. Into that open, full space, the software of your breath has the opportunity to expand, bringing you renewed energy.

Anna Rain is a certified Iyengar yoga instructor. She is profoundly grateful for the organizers who make dance and music events happen. Her current favorite English country dance is Jenna Simpson's Gambols.

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