

Yoga for Dancers—Physical Practice (Outside) Leads to a Settled Mind (Inside)

by Anna Rain

In the course of our daily life, our minds tend to be full of lists, anticipated events (possibly coupled with anxieties), and reflections of past experiences (possibly coupled with regrets). The time we take to focus on precise engagement with our body draws us away from the scattered consciousness of the divided mind and toward the calm, still focus of a settled mind.

The practice of yoga is an eight-limbed path: *asana*—control of the physical body—is but the third stage of this progression toward enlightenment. When we practice *asana*, we use the body as a medium to learn stillness, focus, sensitivity, and awareness. The act of putting the body in poses with precise action requires concerted mental effort. Without the inner focus and attention, the movements of the body constitute “exercise,” (not a bad thing!) as opposed to “a yoga practice.”

Our practice leads us to stabilize our inner selves from the outside in. With time and dedication (combined with not being attached to results; see *CDSS News, Winter 2014-2015*), our practice acknowledges and transforms the distractions inside us, and we are changed from the inside out.

How does this help our dancing? When we work methodically, we find, little by little, the ability to deepen our capacity of connection between the mind and the body. The practice of *asana* makes us more aware of the subtle systems at work. Not only do we strengthen muscles and learn where we might soften and release, but we also have more data about our bodies: we develop strategies for self-care with tightness or hyper-flexibility, with small injuries, with illness or stress. This deepened awareness can lead us to be more grounded, and thence more emotionally available to our dancing community.

This particular pose makes the legs and back stronger and more flexible: the hamstrings lengthen; the outer calves-to-heels increase strength; the abdomen, with correct action, is taken to its optimal place in supporting the low back; the upper back gains the capacity to move in and up.

Extended Feet Intense Pose

This pose challenges our balance and calls us to establish stability from the outside: the arms, the

legs, the torso. The correct action of the arms, legs, and torso draws the abdomen to support the back body. With repeated practice, the confidence we gain in the pose is one measure of yoga affecting us from the inside out. We begin with the foundational pose from *CDSS News, Summer 2015*.

Spread-Apart Hands and Feet Pose

Step the feet apart (if you’re new at this, start with two feet apart; if you are fairly strong, aim for four to five feet apart) and make your feet parallel by taking the heels away from each other.



Line up the little-toe side of the foot with the short edge of the mat or with lines on the floor. To engage the legs, press the little-toe side of the foot into the floor, and draw the front thighs up from the knee to the top of the thigh. Extend your arms out to the side, straight out from the shoulder, in a T. Stretch

the arms so much that you feel you can touch both sides of the room. (see 1)

With the arms and legs fully extended, lift the side body from the hips to the armpits. The more you keep the arms and legs firm and fully lengthened, the more easily the torso will lift.

To recap:

- Feet apart, with outer edges (little-toe side) parallel
- Front thighs drawn up/quadriceps engaged
- Arms stretched out in a T
- Torso lifted from the hips to the armpit

Now bring your attention to your abdomen. Keep the arms, the legs, and the torso alive and stretched and see where your abdomen rests in this pose. It’s likely drawn taut toward the back body, without any clenching, gripping, or holding in. Observe that sensation, and know that that is the fundamental action and correct placement of abdominal integrity (what others might call “core strength”).

From Spread-Apart Hands and Feet pose, we maintain the engagement of the arms and legs, the length of the torso, the resulting placement of the abdomen. Keeping those actions, we bend at the hips

and take the torso forward, eventually to be parallel to the floor. The challenge of this pose is to establish and sustain the correct actions as you come into, be in, and come out of the pose.

- Take the hands to the hip sockets (not the top of the hips) (see 2, 3)
- Draw the abdomen toward the back body
- Roll the shoulders back and the biceps away from each other
- Lengthen the sternum (breastbone) away from the navel
- Move the dorsal spine (in-between the shoulder blades) toward the front body

Now:

- With an exhalation, hinge forward at the hips (see 4)
- Keep the torso moving forward; don't sink back into the hips
- Take the fingertips down to support (floor; stool; chair) (see 5, 6)
- Look forward and extend sternum toward throat
- Lift the abdomen toward the back body
- Keep the upper back straight; don't let it round

To move the dorsal spine in toward the front body:

- Roll the biceps out
- Take the shoulders away from the ears
- Move the side chest toward the wall you're looking at in front of you

Use however high a support you need for your hands in order to keep the integrity of the abdomen and dorsal spine. In the pose, the abdomen must lift to support the low back; the dorsal spine must move away from the back of your shirt to open and challenge the upper back. If you are quite stiff, you might need to have a very high support for your fingers until your upper back gains more flexibility. Lots of columns address this.*

To come out of the pose:

- Firm the legs
- Bring the hands to the hip sockets
- Roll the shoulders back
- Extend the torso forward; don't sink back into the hips
- With an inhalation, bring the torso vertical
- Heel-toe the feet in toward each other, and step the feet together

In the final pose, as well as going into the pose and coming out of it, you want to keep your weight forward (yet not excessively on your hands—the hands are for balance, not weight-bearing!), even as you lift and engage the front thighs and press the quadriceps back into the thigh bone. Pretend your buttocks and back thighs are against a wall: you do have to take the hips back slightly entering and exiting the pose, but you want to minimize that action by keeping the limbs active and the torso moving strongly forward. In the final pose, the hips line up directly over the ankles. (see 5, 6)

As with any pose I introduce in this column, the benefit only comes to you if you practice the pose. Pay attention to the precise actions I describe; note the reactions in your body; develop your sensitivity to the subtle workings inside you. Build the foundation of a strong, flexible body from the outside, then allow the depth of your practice to affect you from the inside.

** March/April 2009; Fall 2009; Winter 2010; Spring 2010; Winter 2012-13; Winter 2013-14; Summer 2014; Fall 2014*

Anna Rain is a Certified Iyengar Yoga Teacher. She dances a lot and plays some music, too. The folks who tell her they read this column make her heart get warm and soft and happy. She would like more gargoyles in her life. Thanks to Buddy System for the swag.

