

Yoga for Dancers—Attention, Extension

by Anna Rain

When we first learn something new, all our attention goes to figuring out how to do what. Making the connection between what we want to do physically and the actual execution thereof sometimes takes concentration and engagement of many body parts. If you have watched a child grip a pencil to write letters, you'll have some compassion for the beginning clog dancer who tensely curls his fingers or the new fiddle player who grips her lips and shoulders.

The attention is necessary at the beginning to focus our will, but as we become more fluid in our movement, we want to progress and to spread our focus, both physically and mentally, until only those muscles needed for the action are engaged. The more we practice the individual skills, the more relaxed we're able to be when we dance, when we play.

In a yoga pose, we take that initial engagement and extend it so that not only do the muscles become more fluid, but our mental effort spreads to encompass multiple points of action.

The equivalent in dance, of course, is building muscle memory, eventually to be able to do more and more figures without clutching all our muscles in concentration: our hands relax, our faces soften, our eyes shine. A guitar player eventually is able to finger runs and pick so that each note is clear: her hands engage only as much as they need to, working in synch with each other without extra tension.

In our yoga practice, these are the first two stages of a four-stage process: Attention, then Extension.

Practice this process with the following pose (Right Angle Pose with bent elbows):

- Put your elbows on the kitchen counter (or a similar ledge), shoulder-width apart
- See that your upper arms are parallel to each other
- Roll your biceps from the inner arm to the outer arm: external rotation
- Bend the elbows and press your palms together, fingers up toward the ceiling
- Step your feet back until your hips are over your ankles
- Feet hip-width apart (about a foot), heels out and toes slightly turned in
- Engage your quadriceps: draw the front thighs up from the knees to the hips
- Lift your abdomen gently toward your lower back (don't grip or push)
- Move the shoulders away from the ears
- Move your dorsal spine (in between the shoulder blades) away from your shirt, toward your front body
- Line up your ears between your upper arms so your head is in line with your spine (not dropped; not lifted)

Another way of approaching this progression of building skill: Focus on each point, going down the list above, one by one. Then see if you can maintain one action and do the next action. Can you then maintain both of those and progress to the third? All three and add the fourth? Did you lose the first? Go back and re-engage, then continue on your list.



We give Attention to each individual action; we gain Extension when we spread our ability to maintain each action while adding another in succession.

Like anything new we attempt, we are clumsy and inept at first: allow yourself to be a beginner! Do a few actions in sequence at a time! Remember yourself as a child learning to write. Did you give up? No! You can write just fine now, and you don't even think about it. Start with small bits and build your skill incrementally.

Depending on your own flexibility, you'll feel this pose in different places: the backs of

the thighs, the shoulder joints (work the external rotation of the biceps to open the shoulders!), the upper back. Wherever you feel sensation, observe it. Keep your breath steady and smooth, always through the nose (unless your nasal passages are blocked). Stay in the pose as long as you can keep your focus on the individual actions; come out when your mind wanders. Take a few breaths, and go into the pose again. A second attempt is almost always more than twice as useful to your body!

Eventually, we seek to maintain each action simultaneously, attending to each one AND then to all of them at once. Attention (one point at a time), then Extension—the actions become more fluid with practice, and we can do more of them with ease. Each point in sequence, then all points at once.

The word “yoga” comes from the Sanskrit root word “yug,” meaning “to join.” We seek, eventually, to join the mind and the body, such that the body is receptive and fluid and the mind is gathered and still. The skill we develop from the work I outline above (engage one action, maintain it, add another action, and so on) draws our attention inward. This practice of drawing inward refreshes our chronically busy minds: when we focus on a specific action, we train our mind to narrow to one point. When we get more proficient at that narrowing of focus, we have a better chance at being able to calm the anxiety that often results from having too much stuff going on in our brains.

My students have taught me that a few minutes a day of attention to specific actions builds capacity, not only in increased physical comfort, but also in the ability to access a calmer mind. This pose needs only you and a counter, and I’ll bet most of you have that in your living space. You can even have your shoes on!

Bonus enticement for Over-Achievers: Once you’ve played with this pose, choose a pose from any of the last several columns (ideally one either that resonates with your body because you did it and it felt right, or one that looks like a pose you know would be good to work toward). Follow the same progression of Attention (to each specific action—maintaining the previous action as you are able) and Extension (as many actions as possible at once).

Anna Rain is a Certified Iyengar Yoga Teacher. Teaching yoga and leading dance take up a lot of her joyful brain-space. She keeps her soul shining with dance, music-making, engagement with her beloved students, and the challenge of heart-filling relationships.

(Connecting and Letting Go, continued from p. 18)
punctuated by stomps on some of the fourth beats, or a double clap after a Petronella Twirl. That’s a group connection that can’t be fully explained. It has to be experienced. Something similar and magic can also happen to me with a waltz, when my partner and I connect to each other and the music, my partner is a strong lead and I am in step with the lead. In those moments I become a better dancer. I feel light on my feet, like I’m almost floating around the dance floor with my partner. Both of these types of experiences can only be described as transcendent.

I let go of a loss and it has opened me up to connections both on and off the dance floor. Life is a series of connections and losses that require letting go. Hopefully I’ll get better at it as I go. I’m sure life will provide me with plenty of opportunities to practice.

Let’s dance!

* Lavender Country and Folk Dance, <http://lcfld.org>

In late 2015, Lisa Lunt wrote a personal reflection on her Facebook page and subsequently offered it to us for publication in the CDSS News. It is a story of her experience with contra dance. Lisa has been dancing contras since August of 2013 “and it has been life changing for me...I have also done some English country dance and have enjoyed that as well. I have been thrilled to learn to waltz. I love love, LOVE contra dancing, but I live for a lovely waltz!”

A resident of Warren, RI, Lisa’s local dances are the Rehoboth, MA Contra Dance and the East Bay Contra Dance (Warren, RI). Her emotional “home” dance is the Jamaica Plain (Boston) Gender Free Contra, where she enjoys its sense of community. LCFD’s dance weekends at Becket, MA each October, and Woodstock, CT each May are a highlight of her dance year. Lisa does the programming of bands and callers for the JP Gender Free Contra and serves on the Board of Directors of the LCFD.

When not dancing, Lisa is a Reiki practitioner, jewelry artist and aromatherapist. Her new hobby is quilting. She is the mother of a 20-year-old adult child with special needs. As a chemically sensitive dancer she has promoted fragrance-free dance environments. She is currently working on a fragrance-free policy with the LCFD board and JP Contra organizers.

Her original post, with a beautiful graphic, is at <https://www.facebook.com/notes/lisa-marie-lunt/connecting-and-letting-go-and-the-yinyang-of-contra/10153660551152278?pnref=lhc>. The image, Lisa said, reminds her a four-hand star.