Yoga for Dancers ~ On Balance

by Anna Rain

Balance and swing. Balance your checkbook. Keep your balance. Balancing act. What do we do when we balance and how do we do it? Why do we want balance? The moments when we have only one foot on the floor are brief—how does balance serve us? Having good balance means you recover more quickly from a misstep, from an impromptu spin, from a partner's momentary slip. Having a grounded physical body that maintains good balance means that more possibilities of movement are available to you, which makes you a more flexible dancer, both corporally and cerebrally.

The study and practice of yoga has eight components, of which asana—control of the physical body—is only one. Mastery of the physical sphere leads to skills that assist in deeper spiritual fulfillment, much the same way as practicing scales opens possibilities to play more complex musical pieces. The deeper knowledge of how one's body moves in space, of knowing one's center of gravity and how it shifts, contributes to the ability to maintain and sustain balance in our lives. When we attend to balance, we learn how small physical actions have profound effects, and that attention leads to greater care in our movements. Being more focused and attentive in our physical body can then lead to a more grounded, calmer mental state.

> "To be grounded and gathered and lifted and long is a wonderful thing!"

Return to the musical metaphor for a moment: think of a time when you play a phrase fast: the notes fall unevenly on each other, and the tune is there but it's rushed, not measured and steady. That's what dancing with little attention to balance is like. Now, when you slow down and play the phrase evenly, seeing that each note is in tune and has good tone, and then, gradually, you increase the speed, the resulting phrase has much more musical integrity. This is what working on balance does for your dancing. When we slow down and focus on the elements of balance, our faster dancing is much smoother and efficient.

Working on balance begins with connection with gravity: in order to balance, you must know where the base of your body contacts the floor. As a folk dancer, that connection is through the feet. Start with bare feet about ten inches apart, and make them parallel—take the heels slightly away from each other so that the outer edges of the feet are closer to parallel than the inner edges. Lift your toes and see how the arch of each foot draws up. Keep the arches sucked up, then lengthen the toes out onto the floor. If you find that keeping your focus on your feet is disconcertingly challenging, sit on the edge of a chair and work your feet without weight-bearing.

(For a full discussion of how to align the body, look back to these columns in the CDSS newsletters: Winter 2008, "Use your bones—not your joints—to support you as you stand," and Fall 2009, "Align the spine.")

And hey! You musicians who stand to play can apply all these concepts of balance to your bodies, too. If you sit to play, sit on the edge of your chair, draw your side ribs and chest up and away from the waist. How you hold any instrument is necessarily asymmetrical: find the balance and evenness in the center of your body, and extend that evenness to the edge of yourself. If you ground yourself and then lift away from the downward pull of gravity, your music will have a base from which to launch, and your body will support your musical expression more fully.

After you've established your connection to gravity via the floor, your next task is to resist gravity. Press your feet down and lift yourself away from the floor. Either sitting or standing, the principles are the same: ground your feet; take your abdomen back; lift the side ribs and chest; lengthen through the back of the neck. Make yourself as thin and tall as you can. "Thin" refers to drawing all your muscles into the bones and toward your center axis.

The more gathered your outer circumference is, the less gravity can get its hooks into you and pull you down. When we give in to gravity, our balance suffers. Any mass of weight that pulls away from the center draws us out of perfect balance. Certainly we can keep from falling by adjusting: we can be "balanced" with one hip off to the side and our torso compensating in the opposite direction. A cantilevered balance, however, is not our optimal starting point. With such an offset, we dance unevenly, like a washing machine spin cycle with all the heavy stuff on one side.

Be tall! Be long! Taller! Lift away from the floor and present yourself in its most vertical manifestation!

This is balance on two feet, and it's no small accomplishment. To be grounded and gathered and lifted and long is a wonderful thing! Now we take this balance on the road and go to one foot. This is not a yoga pose per se, but how you will practice it

involves yogic principles. The description is short and deceptively simple; the dedication to devoted practice to hone your skill at balancing is a lifelong pursuit.

Stand tall and balanced on two feet. Shift your weight to your left foot, and extend the right foot forward about eight inches. As you do this, keep your outer left hip tucked in toward the midline of the body. Don't let the hip cantilever to the left—draw it in and up, just as you did to both sides of the body when you were on two feet. Take the abdomen toward the back body, toward the sacrum, and lift the waist away from the hips and chest away from the waist. Can you keep your balance without wavering? Practice several times a day on alternating feet. One dancer I know does this anywhere she's waiting: in the grocery line, for an elevator, while brushing teeth, on the sidelines of a dance.

> "I've noticed that my ability to shift my weight smoothly and imperceptibly while dancing has steadily improved."

Once you have good balance on one foot, take it to the next level. Keep your body long and lifted—the taller and more drawn in and up you are, the less your balance will waver. Then lift your standing heel slightly. Notice all the changes that happen with this one small shift! Keep the standing hip drawn in and your standing leg firm. Stay even and balanced, and lift the heel a bit more. For our dancing purposes, there's no need to go very high onto the ball of the foot. Can you lift a bit more and remain steady?

Small output; big reward. This simple regimen has made a significant difference in my dancing: I've regularly attended to my balance thus for three or four years, in addition to the balances I do in my daily yoga practice. I've noticed that my ability to shift my weight smoothly and imperceptibly while dancing has steadily improved.

Earlier, I mentioned that focus on balance brings fluidity, smoothness, and efficiency to our faster dancing. Attention to balance also enables us to dance more slowly. One of the reasons dancing slowly is difficult is that we lose our resistance to gravity between one step and the next. When the next footfall comes way sooner than you want, it's not necessarily because the music's too slow! Think of each step as an abbreviated balancing challenge: engage the standing leg and anchor the standing hip, draw yourself up, see if you can resist the pull of gravity and hover before the next beat draws your foot down. When we have better balance, an expanded range of dancing styles is available to us. We can take responsibility for our own weight and carriage in a tango. We can hold our place steady and give support to dancers on either side of us in a Balkan line dance. Certain lovely, measured Swedish dances are now within my grasp because my work on balance has increased my ability to dance more slowly. And, as some dancers in my home community have found, we can bring heightened awareness to a contra dance by lowering the tempo and dancing more slowly, with very satisfying results.

My yoga practice has taught me consistently that attention paid to minute actions focuses my mind. Paradoxically, the work of cultivating this increased focus brings greater freedom from all the things my mind can get tangled in. The practice of balancing the body, I find, quite literally helps balance everything else that I consider important in my life. While indeed the mind can influence the body, my experience shows me that the discipline of working the body brings increased awareness, sensitivity and flexibility to my mind and soul, too.

Anna Rain is a certified Iyengar yoga instructor, and she wholly believes Mr. Iyengar's words, that "…balancing poses keep us from taking ourselves too seriously." She dances, calls and makes music in the Washington, DC area, and can be reached at annarain4@gmail.com.