

# Yoga for Dancers—Descend, Ascend, Broaden, Soften: Strengthen the Muscles that Lift Your Torso

by Anna Rain

For many of us who spend a week or two or five in the summer at dance and music camps, the return to a sedentary existence in a chair during the day is a form of torture. Where is the delightful movement we knew while dancing? Why must we lose the sense of spring in our feet when we sit?

To bring the harmony of correct action in the spine when we sit is to allow for the possibility of energy coursing once again through our body, as it does when we move to music. The strength required to lift the torso—including up through the crown of the head—can take some time to develop. If you begin NOW, your body will respond and learn, and when the light of late fall wanes, you'll have a chest that lifts more easily and breathes more deeply.

I learned wise words from a kinesiologist who works with my yoga teachers: “Your body is strong in the ways you use it.”

This has two meanings:

—If we take the care to find correct action and move with integrity, we can strengthen various aspects of how our body works; and

—When we move asymmetrically, when we favor one side, and when we compensate for pain, we make parts of our body strong in ways that do NOT serve us.

In what ways would you want your body to be strong? Do you wish to stand tall for as many years as you can? Do you wish to find ways to move without pain? Do you want to keep flinging the hankies over your head?

When you take five minutes to remind your torso to lift, you build capacity for strength. You remind your body what it can do in short segments of time, and little by little, you give your body an opportunity to absorb this taller, stronger torso. Your head extends this length and lift, and becomes light at the top of your spine. Your body incorporates the frequent reminders and uses them to make that the “new normal.” The more you take small moments to defy gravity, the easier this work becomes.

An added benefit to these brief sessions of focus on the lift of your torso: your mind receives a break from the work that consumes you for hours at a time and you

have some moments of internal focus. These moments are beneficial to your physical and emotional state: the respite from head work is refreshing to both mind and body.

These previous columns might be helpful, either in similar actions described, or possibly as inspiration: Summer 2015 and Fall 2015: Abdominal Integrity, parts 1+2; Fall 2016: Float the Floating Ribs and An Altar for the Heart.

Start with five minutes of torso lift in a chair, 3-5 times a day. You'll need a chair with a firm seat (cushy office chair need not apply), and possibly a way to set a periodic alarm for yourself. If you remind yourself of these actions every hour or two during the day, your body will adopt the habit much more quickly.

Sit on the front edge of a firm seated chair. Your buttock bones are on the chair, and your thighs are parallel to each other and parallel to the floor, and your feet are under the knees. To assure the thighs are parallel to the floor: use support under your feet if your legs are shorter than the distance between the floor seat and the floor; put a firm blanket under your buttock bones if your legs are longer thus.

- press your hands on the seat of the chair behind your hips
- you may have to bend your elbows if your arms are long in relation to your torso, or cup your fingers if your arms are short



The following create a downward action:

- take the whole top thigh crease down, using the thumb-side blade of your hand (fingers pointing inward)
- sweep the buttock flesh down, away from waist (this is not a tilt of the pelvis)
- extend the tailbone down, toward the chair



From that downward action, lift:

- the armpit chest (use your thumbs to draw front armpits away from waist)
- the low back ribs
- the sternum (breastbone)
- the crown of the head (with your hand on top of the head, find the warm spot; that's the crown)



The head is heavy, and most of us wrench the neck forward (to look at computer screens...?), which causes much of the soreness and fatigue we feel in the shoulders. See that you connect the downward action of the tailbone directly with the upward extension of the crown of the head: make your spine lifted and long!

Maintain those downward actions and all the actions that lift. Add this action:

- pull the front tips of the shoulders away from each other (hook your fingers inside the front shoulder bones), to the walls on either side of you; right side to the right and left side to the left



All this effort has the potential to create stress in places where we don't want it. Bring your attention to your neck, your jaw, your facial skin. Are you aware of tension in the head and neck?

Continue all the previous actions (descent; ascent; breadth) and add release in the neck, head, and face:

- move the neck gently to see it's not gripped
- lengthen the neck up and away from the shoulders
- drop the jaw (keep the lips closed but the teeth separated)
- open the throat (an audible exhalation helps your throat relax)
- soften the muscles and skin on the face, especially around the eyes
- release the brain toward the heart

And now, re-pose yourself, using the assistance of your arms:

- descend the base (buttock flesh, thigh crease, tailbone) of the pose
- ascend the spine (side ribs, back ribs, armpit chest, sternum, crown of head)
- broaden the front tips of the shoulders
- soften the neck, head, face, and brain

Maintain all those actions, and then bring your palms to rest on your thighs. Can you keep the spine long and lifted from its base? Do you extend all the way up through the crown of the head? Repeat: Use your arms once again to re-intensify the lift of the spine, and then, once again, keep that and bring your palms to your thighs.

One of my students said to me recently, when speaking of a wrist issue, "I feel like I'm getting weaker!" And I replied, "Exactly! We're ALL getting weaker unless we're working to make ourselves stronger (or at the very least, stemming the tide of strength ebbing...)."

What will you do today to build strength, to make space in your torso? What moments will you offer yourself, to direct inward, as respite from your work? What small repeated efforts will you engage to lift your body away from the pull of gravity? How tall will your head be above your shoulders? How might that added strength bring more ease to your dancing and music-making?

*Anna Rain is a Certified Iyengar Yoga Teacher. She finished this column after a dip in Round Pond, while listening to accordion music and the wind in the pines. Her gratitude to CDSS for all her (past and future) camp experiences is deep and enduring.*

**WEB EXTRAS!** Links to earlier "Yoga for Dancers" articles cited in this article will be on our website when this issue is posted in September — <https://www.cdss.org/news>

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