

explorations  
into the  
**yoga-dance** relationship

**fern deoliveira**  
may 9, 2004  
in requirement for  
**core yoga** teacher training certification

© 2004 *fern deoliveira*  
*no part of this document may be reproduced in any form without the author's consent*

According to Hindu philosophy Lord Shiva, the source of Yoga, danced the world into existence and gave it order; the universe is thus viewed as *Nataraja*, the ‘Cosmic Dance of Shiva’. Dance and yoga have long been described as two rivers stemming from the same source (The One), and this paper will illustrate a few interesting aspects of this relationship: how are yoga and dance similar as a physical discipline, how they are different, what is required of the practitioner, some common injuries related to practice, and why these two traditions have been intertwined for millennia.

In its simplest definitions, yoga and dance can be reduced to *breath with movement*, or *breath-guided movement*. This identifies one major link between these two: *prana* or life-force, as breath. *Prana* moves both the yogi and the dancer; indeed it moves us all, but they are more attuned to *prana*, how to use it, and how to benefit from it. Yogis and dancers use *prana* as a tool, whereas the large majority of the population might never even notice the breath as it moves them day after day - it’s easy to take it for granted or to never think about it, because somehow it’s always *there*. The evolution of the human body made breathing such a ‘brainless’, involuntary task that there is virtually no need for *remembering to inhale* or to ever think about breathing – it is a constant. The yogi and dancer, however, have a closer relationship with *prana* and their own breathing habits.

The major difference between yoga and dance is the focus: we do yoga from a place inside the body and mind and that’s where the focus should stay throughout practice; it’s never about achieving the ‘perfect pose’, or about competition, or wanting to force the

body into asana. Dance, on the other hand, has its focus on the outward performance, how the movements look, who is better, and the pressure of all eyes on the dancer at all times.

As physical disciplines, both yoga and dance can be suited to specific goals or different levels of ability by modifications in practice pace, intensity, and anatomical focus. For example, ballerinas might concentrate one day on floor exercises that purposefully open the hip joints in order to achieve better turnouts; similarly, a restorative yoga class can be suited for those who suffer from hip injuries by focusing on a sequence of hip poses and meditation to open up and heal the hip joints.

Philosophically, both yoga and dance are viewed as “ways of calling us back into our bodies to irrigate our being with *prana*” (Shiva Rea, in her CD *Yoga Trance Dance*), and in so doing are vehicles for the journey of attainment of *samadhi*. Some dance traditions are so linked to this self-fulfilling realization wish that dance has always been an integral part in certain religious rituals, ceremonies and other cultural rites of passage. Sacred dances abound in many religions and usually emphasize the union between man and the earth. Good examples of them are Harvest Dances, Rain Dances, and Fertility Dances.

In contrast, the lifestyles of the yogi and dancer differ more than most of us would think at first; for the purposes of this comparison, I will focus on professional dancers (such as elite ballerinas) and ‘serious yoga practitioners’ since there is no such thing as a professional yogi. The yogi is generally a conscious, aware individual who strives to do

good, and promote love and peace around him; he might be a vegetarian or a vegan, and eats to support his practice. He knows to not push limits or set goals for his practice, but rather listens to the body and lets the breath dictate his movement. He is limber, flexible and toned (I understand yogis come in many different shapes and sizes – this is merely a generalization for the purposes of the argument). Yearning to live from that meditative state, through disciplined practice he may ultimately become the *serene observer*.

The dancer is equally aware of breath and its effects on his practice, but lives from a reasonably more stressful place; competition is the norm in the field, and anxiety is therefore always present. Dancers are extremely flexible, strong, and conditioned for movement – their physique is paramount to good performance. At the extreme, some dancers develop eating disorders in order to achieve a certain body composition; instead of eating to nutritionally support their practice (as yogis also often do) the dancer who suffers from disorders such as bulimia nervosa and anorexia nervosa has a **body** which lives as a consequence of the practice, and as a result of the eating disorder, suffers to inefficiently support it. Because of the competitive nature of professional dance, in view of the focus on performance and ‘grading’, some dancers also have issues regarding low self-esteem. As a result of the strict and demanding training schedule, fatigue is also a problem; such lifestyles are under constant stress.

Since yogis have a generally better grasp on tension and anxiety relief methods than dancers, they do not get injured as often. The dancer, like the athlete, experiences substantial physical demands related to movement and impact. The injuries sustained in

dance - as well as the measures taken to treat, rehabilitate, and prevent these injuries - are similar to those encountered in sports.

Ronald Smith, a University of Washington psychology professor and lead author of a new study published in the current issue of the journal *Anxiety, Stress and Coping*, said that the injury rate for dancers in a ballet company over an eight-month period was 61 percent. This is comparable to rates found in other studies for athletes in contact sports such as football and wrestling. An “injury” was defined as a medical problem that restricted participation for at least one day beyond the date of the injury.

The dancers in this lifestyle study also filled out several questionnaires that measured positive and negative life events, and a performance anxiety scale that measured fears about performing poorly. In an earlier paper from this same study, researchers found that high levels of life stress and low social support were harbingers of injuries among dancers. The new study also focused on anxiety as a factor in injuries while performing (‘anxiety about performance’ not being a common problem among yogis).

Anxiety has *physical* and *cognitive* components, according to Smith. *Physical anxiety* includes such things as muscle tension, nervous sweating, butterflies in the stomach, hyperventilating or a pounding heart. *Cognitive anxiety* is broken into two parts: a **loss or lack of focus** and **worrying**. "There are several theories about which factors cause injuries. One is that *if you are performing while physically tense you are more likely to be injured*, said Smith. "Another is that if your mind is not on the task at hand, if you are

worried or not focused, it is easier to get hurt. We found that it is a combination of all three factors - loss or lack of focus, worrying and physical anxiety - that puts dancers at risk for being hurt."

So dancers have the constant shadow of a serious physical injury looming over their already stressed heads in a vicious cycle. The range of injuries sustained by dancers is varied, but resides mainly (in over two-thirds of dance injury cases studied) in the lower extremities, namely: feet, ankles, knees and hips; nearly one-fifth involve the spine, lower back being the most widespread. Foot injuries are more common in female dancers; ankle and spine injuries are evenly distributed between genders. Nearly half of the injuries each year represent a strain, sprain or tendonitis.

Nevertheless, as stated before, yoga and dance do have an intrinsic bond, and many have recently explored the fusion of yoga and dance when experienced and performed together. Najma Ayash, a renowned dancer and teacher of the Jaipur tradition of Kathak Dance, and her Universal Yoga Dance of the Soul is worthy of mention. She has developed "an aesthetic blend of yoga postures and expressions of dances extracting from various dance techniques of Indian temples, depicting ancient rituals and dances of gods and goddesses in relation to the forces of nature. A mystical dance/exercise dating back to ancient India, Yoga Dance is designed to evoke the sacred temple within us - emphasizing balance and spiritualism in relation to the universal law of nature by *transcending the limitations of the physical.*"

A typical class consists of 45 minutes of low-impact Hatha Yoga, starting with breathing and revitalizing the body, steadying the emotions and proceeding with the practice of various postures and counter stretches toning the back muscles and maintaining elasticity of the spine. The second 45 minutes is devoted to adding expression to the body. The various gestures and movements are taken from a cross-cultural integration of music, poetry and dance. These dances are designed to stimulate the energy centers within the individual body themselves, the chakras.

Similarly, Shiva Rea has created Yoga Trance Dance, which she describes as “a contemporary exploration of the spirit of dance within yoga.” As an exploration of free-form consciousness, Yoga Trance Dance aims to use breath-driven movement and rhythmic ambient music as a means to induce meditation; this dynamic moving meditative state (“trance”) promotes the liberation or unleashing of the student’s creative life force. Recommended for anyone who is interested in the interconnections of yoga and dance, Yoga Trance Dance seems to be a much-needed union between active body and active mind. Rea claims to have been inspired by the body/mind rift in modern life: our sedentary routines, where we do all our most mentally challenging work seated at desks, on the phone, driving or staring at the computers for hours on end. We are continually static, while mentally overactive, and this split can have detrimental effects on our bodies and minds.

In a book titled [A Yoga of Indian Classical Dance: the Yogini’s Mirror](#), Roxanne Gupta tells of her vision for a union of classical Indian dance and yoga, where the two traditions

are complementary and essential to one another. Yogic concentration is necessary for exacting the intricate hand gestures, postures and movements of Indian classic dance, and conversely, “the esthetics, symmetry and dynamics of dance enhance the practice of yoga”. Gupta brings together these two “great streams of consciousness and practice” after having become a master of Kuchipudi, a classical form of Indian dance and having studied with many teachers of the hatha and kriya yoga traditions. The result of what Gupta calls her “tantric approach to yoga and dance” is the Dance of the Yogini, the sacred feminine being who dances with one foot in nature and the other foot in the realm of the gods.

Also emerging are forms of yoga-dance therapy. One center in San Francisco offers Healing Through Yoga and Dance, a class where healing happens through conscious movement, breath, self-expression and creativity. With a precise mind/body approach, patients are able to improve their self-confidence and freedom by re-awakening the body to action and movement (for example, after a car accident or severe illness), and re-gain their function, motility and strength through rehabilitative exercise and conditioning.

Patients/students are also encouraged to take an assertive attitude towards recovery by creatively sharing their story, dancing their life experience and engaging wholly (mind, body and spirit) into their healing process. Students in the class are then an active part of each other’s healing process. Some goals in the Healing Through Dance program include mobilize feeling in the body, expressing survival, resolving emotional life issues, finding creative ways of bringing back meaning to life, or increasing movement range and

strength, among others. Students are taught techniques to deal with tension, enhance and promote relaxation, and cope with medical procedures or body limitations.

In coexistence, yoga and dance are natural complements of each other; the flexibility the dancer needs can be achieved with a regular yoga practice. The dynamics and creativity of dance can make a student's yoga practice more graceful and blissful. A frequent astanga vinyasa practice has been shown to improve cardio-vascular efficiency, which is the main draw into power yoga – the cardio workout is intense and much more pleasant and meditative than the treadmill.

Yoga also promotes and cultivates the idea of stretching the body in all directions, as in Trikonasana; dancers call this 'creating your own opposing stretch', a key concept in strengthening the core muscles as well as perfecting the sense of balance so the dancer is free to move. The reason the yogi doesn't topple over in Natarajasana is precisely because he knows to always evenly distribute his weight onto his foundation, even if that means the lone foot. The dynamics of the pose require the yogi to enliven and strengthen in all opposing directions: the raised front arm, the back leg and foot pressing into the rear hand, the foot planted on earth and the crown of the head reaching for the sky. This ability to become 'instantly balanced' is optimal for posture and obviously a great asset to the dancer. Yoga also instills a body/mind 'one-ness' that is essential for dancers who want to avoid injury by *dancing from the inside* and remaining focused on their dance at all times.

My conclusion after having briefly researched the relationship between yoga and dance is two-fold:

1. The beneficial relationship of yoga and dance not being in question, it is my conclusion and proposition that all serious dancers implement a daily yoga regimen to complement their dance practice;
2. Similarly, a yoga practitioner would greatly benefit from the dynamics and burst of creativity to be gained from a regular dance routine, not necessarily professionally, but as a hobby.

In addition, one of the directions I would like to pursue is a yoga sequence created with dancers' bodies and needs in mind. This sequence would contain a number of yogic stretches aimed at the arms, legs and core; standing poses to strengthen the legs; plenty of balance poses to cultivate the control of the core muscles; some vinyasa to work on cardiovascular stamina; and a meditation session at the end to integrate the benefits of the sequence.

One other topic that interests me for future research is the yoga-dance therapy method, not unlike the approach used by the Healing Through Yoga Center in San Francisco. I will need to learn more about what group to cater to, perhaps by visiting similar centers to get an idea of what types of mind/body physical/psychological problems can be treated with this approach.