

freedom

of Movement with Yogic Breath

BY DANA RAE PARE

In my last article I talked about the many different styles of yoga and those that were most attractive to dancers. One of those styles, Astanga Vinyasa, is unique in the way it combines the power of breath with physical movement.

Breath is quite simply the breath of life. It is the first thing we do when we are born and the last movement before we die. The ancient yogis believed we were born with a certain number of breaths, and the more you controlled and extended the breath, the longer you would live. Whether or not that is true, there is no question that proper breathing has an enormous affect on every aspect of life.

There are few performers or public speakers who don't use breathing techniques to prepare themselves before appearing. And we all know that taking a few deep breaths before opening our mouths and expressing anger will bring calm and a little more logic to our argument.

CALM & FOCUSED

Calmness is the key. It is so obvious when you think about it that you wonder why you hadn't noticed before. Your breathing sends a signal to your body. If you are fearful or in a panic, you hold your breath. When you do this, you become tense and stiff. When you breathe deeply, the body is more relaxed, calm and more flexible.

In dance as in yoga, we often ask our bodies to move in ways that seem unnatural. When we first attempt these maneuvers our bodies rebel, often by moving into panic. We stiffen, and our body tells our mind (and often our mind tells our body) that we can't do it. Conscious, steady breathing calms the body, lulls it into a sense of normality and sends the message that all is OK. This, in turn, allows the body to stay focused and to explore the movement more deeply — improving the fluidity and quality of the experience.

Most of the time we all breathe unconsciously. Breath just happens by itself. We've been doing it since we were born, so what's the big deal? The big deal is that the ribcage, the area we breathe into, has an enormous affect on the body. And that means posture. Every rib is attached to the spine, which means every breath can help extend and grow the spine. This creates freedom of movement as you create more length and space between the vertebrae.

EVOLUTION & POSTURE

As a life form, our skeletons haven't truly evolved to match our vertical and sedentary lifestyles; they are much better suited to walking on all fours. The affects of gravity on the spine are well documented, with disc degradation and vertebral fusing in the lower back affecting many people from their early 20s. Add to that our modern-day life that has us slumped behind computer screens, holding onto steering wheels and stress levels that knot our shoulder muscles, and you begin to see

a pattern that leads to a collapsed chest and bad posture. Pretty gloomy stuff, but learning how to use the breath properly can significantly improve the rate of deterioration, your posture and the quality of your life.

YOGIC BREATH

The yoga term for breath is *ujjayi pranayama* (oooh-jayee pra-na-yar-ma). Translated literally this means "upward victorious extension of the life force." *Ujjayi pranayama* is a full, deep, audible-sounding breath. And in *Ashtanga Vinyasa yoga* (literally, movement with breath), *Ujjayi* is often combined with another Sanskrit word, *Uddiyana Bandha* (UD-ee-arna bun-da). *Uddiyana Bandha* means an upward, energetic lock.

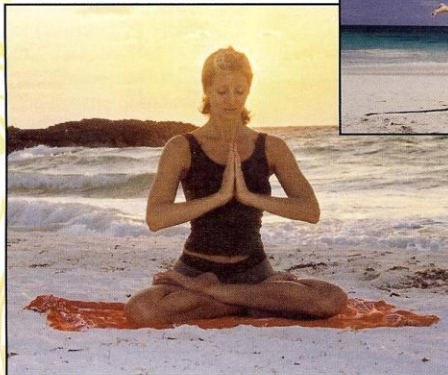
Why is this yogic breath important to dancers? With *Ujjayi* you breathe through your nose. This filters and purifies the air and ensures it has the correct

humidity for the lungs. As you inhale, the ribcage lengthens and therefore the spine. The chest fully expands creating space and freedom through the shoulders. This deep inhalation supports any movement of extension — lifts and reaches. The exhalation is often com-

combined with *Uddiyana Bandha* (upward, energetic lock), which means the naval is drawn in and up on the exhale, opposite of the way most people normally breathe. The drawing in and up through the central axis of the body supports the back, strengthens all movement, enhances balance, and is beneficial in twists and forward bending.

In *Ashtanga Vinyasa yoga* there is no movement without breath and no breath without movement. This not only gives *Ashtanga Vinyasa* its dynamic rhythm, but also is the

basis for its sequencing. Naturally, as a dancer you will have experienced the powerful affect of the breath on movement. But knowledge of yogic breathing will help you understand the anatomy of movement in an entirely new light. This is why top athletes are now actively incorporating this breathing into their training sessions. Conscious yogic breath can enhance performance, providing energy, strength, fluidity, focus and, most importantly, freedom. **DSD**



Dana Rae Paré RYT 500 is the owner and creative force behind Infinite Yoga, an urban yoga studio in the heart of Little Italy. Dana embodies the essence of Ashtanga Vinyasa yoga, creating a safe place and empowering students to release, let go and discover themselves. Her classes are known for being insightful and challenging, integrating breath with movement and understanding. Infinite Yoga presents workshops and yoga retreats worldwide and produces CDs and DVDs for home study. Local dancers who have studied with Dana include Rebecca Bryant, Leslie Seiters, Justin Morrison & Heather Stants.