

## STRETCHING EXERCISES FOR TANGO DANCERS

**Author: Bob Anderson**

**Illustrations: Jean Anderson**

**Editor: Victor Levant**

**webmaster vlevant@hotmail.com**

In 2002 I contacted stretching guru Bob Anderson for assistance in stretching exercises. The neophyte tango dancer has an erroneous image of dancers in a rigid military posture, whereas in reality the top dancers are utterly relaxed, able to move at will from their centre. Bob Anderson kindly put together these three series of exercises. His book STRETCHING (copyright 2000, distributed in Canada by Publishers Group Canada) has been translated into 29 languages and has sold 5 million copies. He may be contacted on his web site at <http://www.stretching.com>

### GENERAL INSTRUCTIONS

It is always advisable to do several minutes of warm-up; simple walking and swinging arms just to warm the muscles and related soft tissue before you begin stretching. You will injure yourself if you are too much in a hurry, push yourself too far or not pay attention to the feeling of the stretch.

The right way to stretch is a relaxed, sustained stretch with your attention focused on the targeted muscles. Injuries occur when people bounce up and down or stretch to the point of pain.

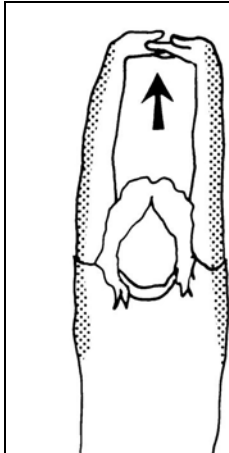
In all cases, when you begin a stretch, spend 10-15 seconds in an easy stretch, feeling just a mild tension and relax as you hold the stretch. You should always be able to say: "I feel the stretch, but I feel no pain." The next step is a developmental stretch, involving another fraction of an inch, until you feel a mild tension again. Hold another 10-15 seconds maximum. Breathing should be slow, rhythmical and under control. Exhale as you exert yourself, especially as you bend forward. In standing exercises, keep one or both knees slightly bent at all times.

If you push too far, the stretch reflex will kick in and the very muscles you want to stretch will tighten to protect your body. Pain is an indication that something is wrong. Usually this means you are pushing yourself too far or you are doing the stretch incorrectly. If you have recurrent pain, consult your physician, osteopath or physiotherapist.

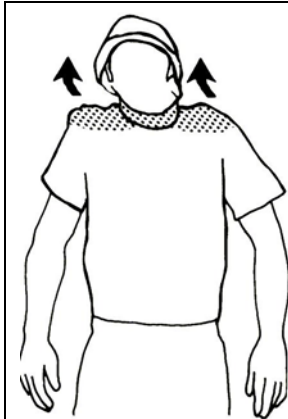
If you stretch regularly (3-4 times a week), do so *before* dancing tango. If not, do the stretching exercises *after* dancing tango or another unrelated time.

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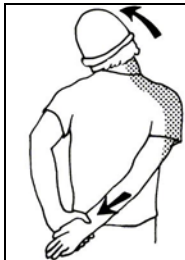
## NECK, SHOULDER, ARMS AND BACK: STANDING



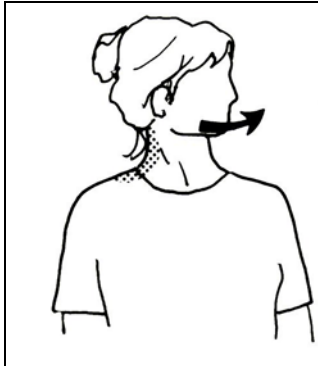
1.) Interlace your fingers above your head. Now, with your palms facing upward, push your arms slightly back and up. Feel the stretch in the arms, shoulder and upper back. Hold stretch for 15 seconds. *Do not hold your breath.*



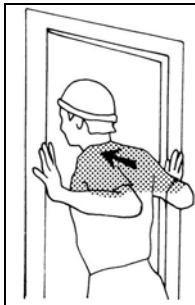
2.) Shoulder shrug. Raise the top of your shoulders toward your ears until you feel slight tension in the neck and shoulders. Hold this feeling of tension for 3-5 seconds, and then relax your shoulders downward into their normal position. Do this 2-3 times. Good to use at the first signs of tightness or tension in the shoulder and neck area.



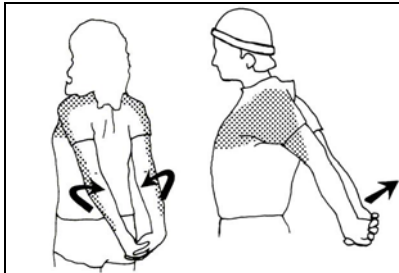
3.) To stretch the side of your neck, lean your head sideways toward your left shoulder as you left hand pulls your right arm down and across, behind your back. Hold an easy stretch for 10-15 seconds. Do both sides.



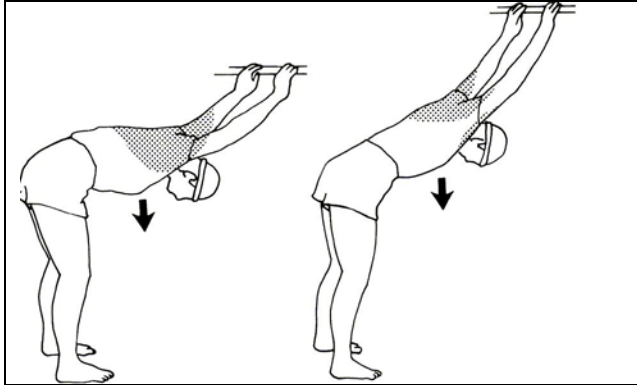
4.) Turn your chin toward your left shoulder to create a stretch on the right side of your neck. Hold correct stretch tensions for 10-15 seconds. Stretch to each side twice.



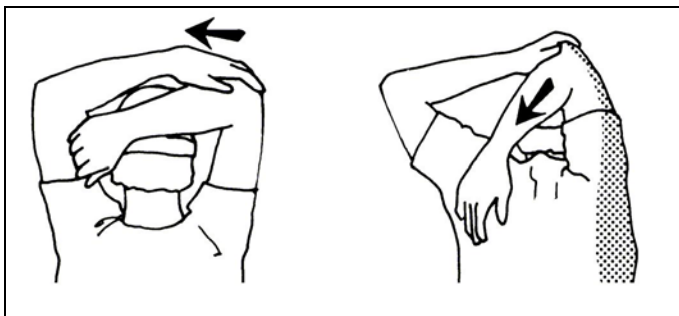
5.) Stand in a doorway and place your hands about shoulder height on either side of the doorway. Move your upper body forward until you feel a comfortable stretch in your arms and chest. Keep your chest and head up and knees slightly bent while doing this stretch. Hold stretch for 15 seconds.



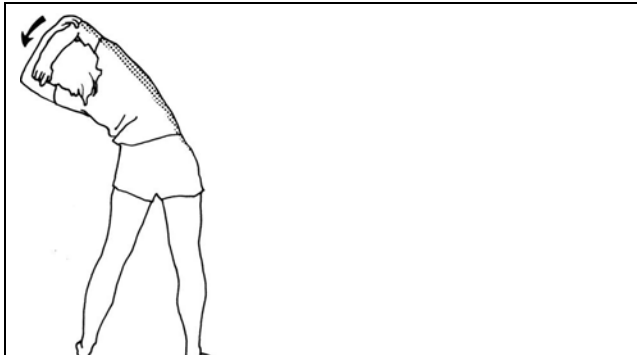
6.) The next stretch is done with the fingers interlaced behind your back (fig 1). Slowly turn your elbows inward while straightening your arms. This is good to do when you find yourself slumping forward from your shoulders. This stretch can be done at any time. Hold for 5-15 seconds. Do twice. *If the above exercise is fairly easy*, then lift your arms up behind you until you feel a stretch in the arms, shoulders or chest. Hold an easy stretch for 5-10 seconds. Keep your chest out and chin in (fig 2).



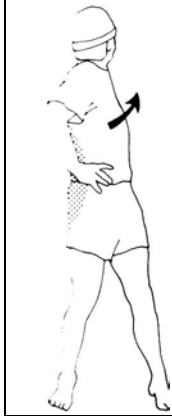
7.) Place both hands shoulder width apart on a ledge or fence and let your body drop down as you keep your knees slightly bent (1 inch-2.5 cm). Your hips should be directly over your feet. To change the area of your stretch, bend your knees just a bit more and /or place your hands at different heights. Find a stretch that you can hold for at least 30 seconds. *Remember to always bend your knees when coming out of this stretch.*



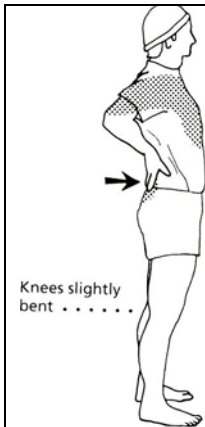
8.) With arms overhead, hold the elbow of one arm with the hand of the other arm. Keeping knees slightly bent (1 inch-2.5 cm), gently pull your elbow behind your head as you bend from your hips to the side. Hold an easy stretch for 10 seconds. Do both sides. *Keeping your knees slightly bent will give you better balance.*



9.) From a standing position, with your knees slightly bent ( 1 inch), gently pull your elbow behind your head as you bend from your hips to the side. Hold an easy stretch for 10 seconds. Do both sides. Keep your knees slightly bent for better balance. Do not hold your breath.

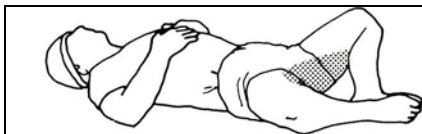


10.) Start with your hands on your hips, feet pointed straight ahead, knees slightly bent. Rotate hips to the left as you look over your left shoulder. Hold and easy stretch for 10 seconds. Stretch each side twice. *Be relaxed and breathe easily.* This is a good stretch for lower back, hips and upper body. Especially for disassociation so critical to tango.

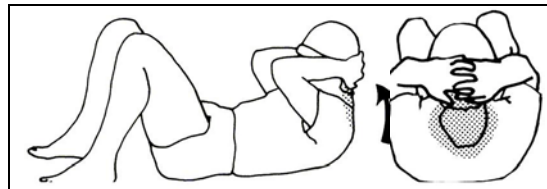


11.) Standing with your knees slightly bent, place your palms on your lower back just above the hips, fingers pointing downward. Gently push your palms forward to create an extension in the lower back. Hold for comfortable pleasure for 10-12 seconds. Repeat twice. Use this stretch after sitting for an extended period of time.

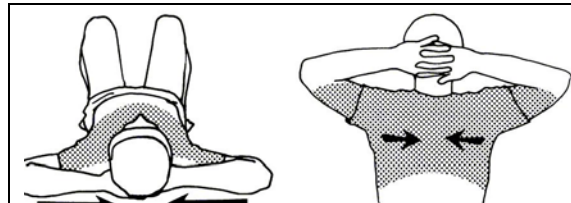
### NECK, BACK AND HIPS: LYING



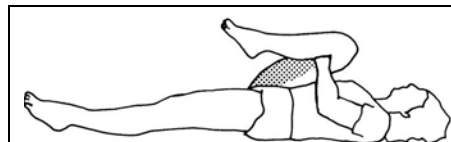
12.) Relax with your knees bent and the soles of your feet together. This comfortable position will stretch your groin. Hold this stretch for 15-20 seconds.



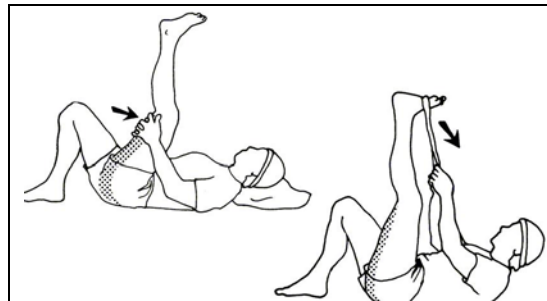
13.) Interlace your fingers behind your head and rest your arms downward. Using the power of your arms, slowly bring your head and shoulders forward until you feel a slight stretch in the neck and upper back area. Think of elbows going into mid thighs. Hold an easy stretch for 5 seconds. Repeat 3 times. *Do not overstretch.*



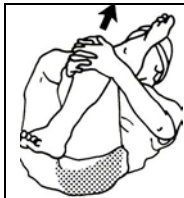
14.) Shoulder Blade Pinch: From the bent knee position pull your shoulder blades together to create tension in the upper back area. (As you do this, your chest should move upward.) Hold this controlled position for 4-5 seconds; then relax. Now using the power of your arms, gently pull your head forward until you feel a slight stretch in the back of the neck. This will help release tension and allow the neck to be stretched effectively.



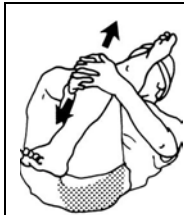
15.) Next straighten both legs and relax. Then pull your left leg toward your chest with both hands behind the knee. For this stretch keep the back of your head on the mat. Do not strain; do not pull your leg further than it can comfortably go. Hold a comfortable stretch for 30 seconds. Repeat, pulling your right leg toward your chest.



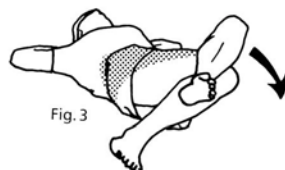
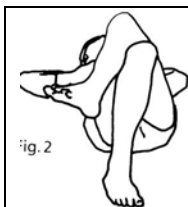
16.) Lie on your back and lift your leg up **towards** a 90° angle at the thigh joint. Keep your low back always against the floor. What is important is to bend the knee to 90°; raise your lower leg gently and only as far as you can comfortably go. You can hold onto the back of your raised leg with your hands to create the stretch or use a towel or elastic cord around the bottom of the foot. Pull gently. You may put a pillow under your head for more comfort.



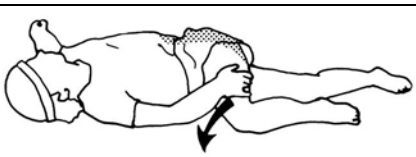
17.) Lie on your back. Bend your right knee and put the outside of your right lower leg just above your opposite knee. With your hands just below your left knee, gently pull your leg toward your chest until a stretch is felt deep in your right buttocks area. Hold for 15-20 seconds. Lift the back of your head off the ground and look straight ahead as you stretch. Breathe slowly and deeply. Repeat for the other side.

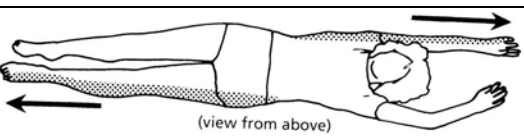


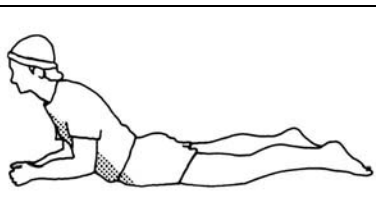
18.) A variation of the exercise #16. Another way to stretch is the Contract-Relax-Stretch technique. Starting from the previous position, move your left leg downward as you resist movement for 4-5 seconds. Then relax and stretch for 15-20 seconds as previously described.



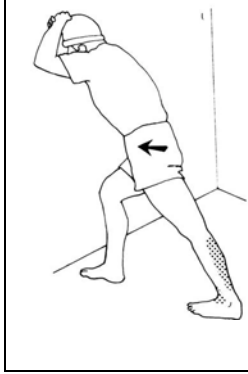
19.) Lift your left leg and pull it over the right leg. From here, use your left leg to pull your right leg toward the floor until you feel a good stretch. Stretch and relax. Keep the upper back, shoulders, and elbows flat on the floor. The idea is not to touch the floor with your right knee, but to stretch within *your* limits. Hold for 20-30 seconds. Repeat and stretch for the other side, crossing the right over the left leg and pulling down to the right. Exhale as you go into the stretch, then breathe rhythmically as you stretch.

	<p>20.) Straighten your right leg and with your right hand pull your bent leg up and over the other leg as show in the drawing above. Make sure that both of your shoulders and your head are kept on the floor. Turn your head to look toward the hand of your left arm that is straight out from the shoulder. Now with your other hand on your thigh (resting just above the knee), control the stretch in your lower back and butt muscles by pulling your upper (left) leg down toward the floor. Repeat the stretch to your other side. Hold stretch for 15-30 seconds, each side.</p>
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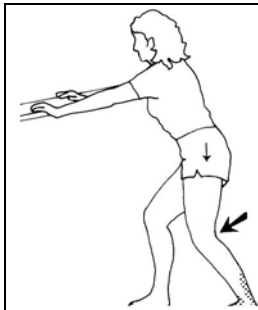
	<p>21.) Lying on your back, stretch diagonally by pointing the toes of your <i>left</i> foot as you extend your <i>right</i> arm. Stretch as far as is comfortable. Hold for 5 seconds, then relax. Stretch the <i>right</i> leg and the <i>left</i> arm the same way. Hold each stretch for at least 5 seconds; then relax. Do not hold your breath.</p>
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	<p>22.) Back Extension: Starting from a prone position (lying on your stomach), place your elbows beneath your shoulders. A mild tension should be felt in the middle to lower back area. Keep the front of the hips on the floor. Hold for 5-10 seconds. Repeat 2-3 times.</p>
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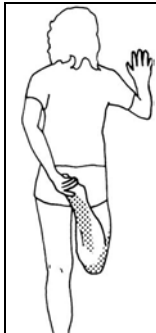
**LEGS AND HIPS: STANDING**



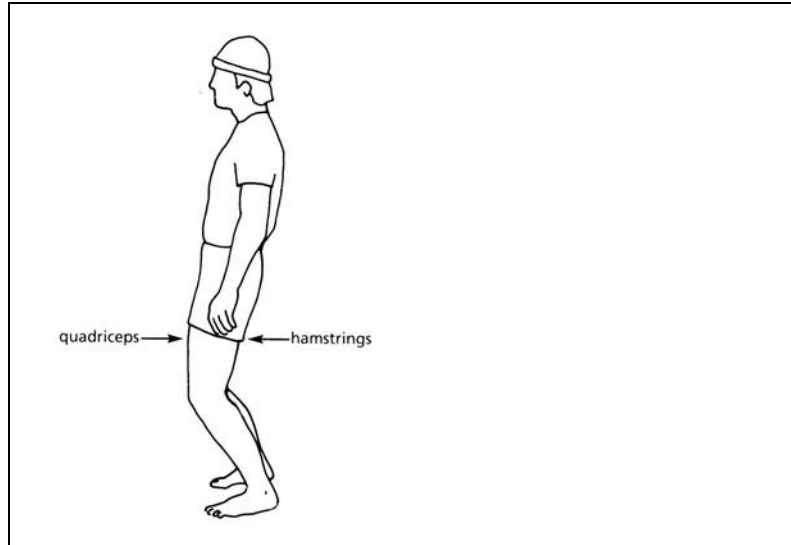
23.) To stretch your calf, stand a little ways from a solid support and lean on it with your forearms, your head resting on your hands. Bend one leg and place your foot on the ground in front of you leaving the other leg straight, behind you. Slowly move your hips forward until you feel a stretch in the calf of your straight leg. Be sure to keep the heel of the foot of the straight leg on the ground and *your toes pointed straight ahead*. Hold an easy stretch for 20 seconds. Do not bounce.



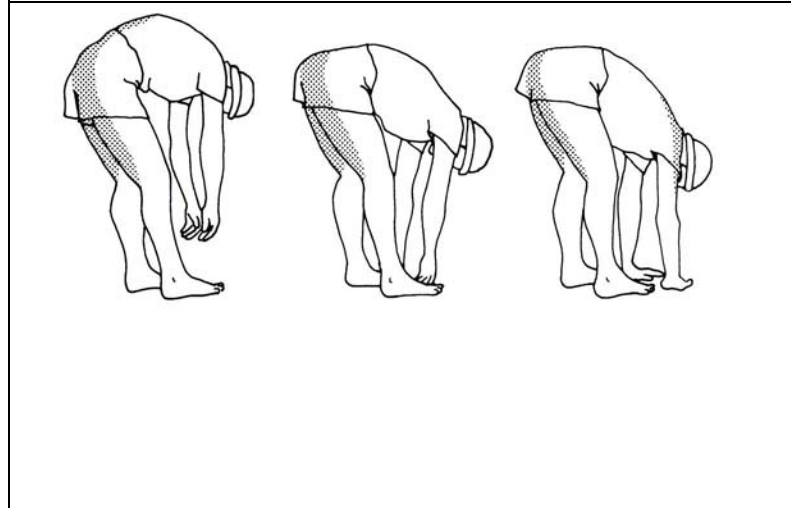
24.) To stretch the soleus and Achilles tendon slightly bend the back knee, keeping the foot flat. This gives you a much lower stretch, which is also good for maintaining or regaining ankle flexibility. 10 seconds, each leg. This area needs only a *slight* feeling of stretch. Stretch both legs.



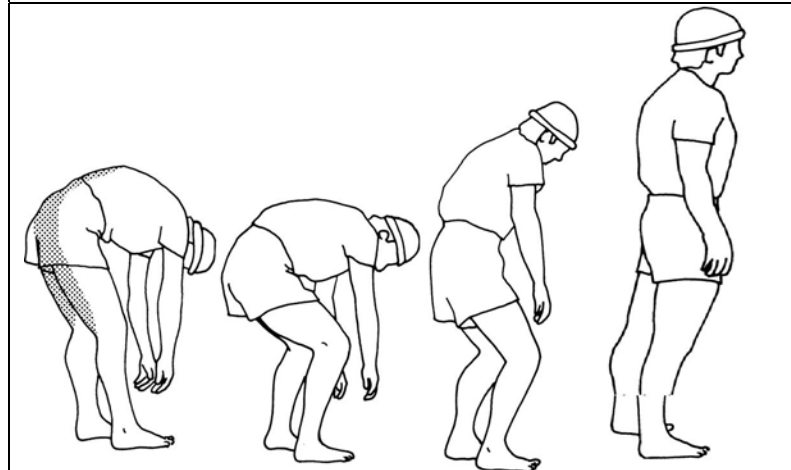
25.) Opposite hand to opposite foot—quads and knee stretch. Hold top of left foot (from inside of foot), with right hand and gently pull, heel moving toward buttocks. The knee bends at a natural angle in this position and creates a good stretch in the knee and quads. Hold for 30 seconds. Do both legs.



26.) Stand in this bent-knee position (fig 1), which contracts the quadriceps and relaxes the hamstrings. Hold for 30 seconds. The front leg-quadriceps should feel hard and tight while the back leg-hamstrings should feel soft and relaxed.



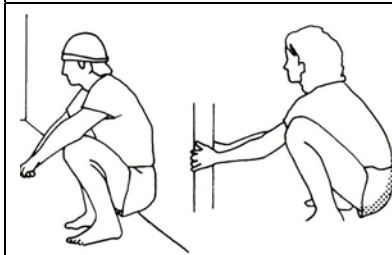
After holding the bent-knee position, stand up and then slowly bend down again from the hips (fig 2). **Always keep knees slightly bent during this stretch so lower back is not stressed.** Let your neck, arms and hands relax. Go to the point where you feel a slight stretch in the back of your legs. Stretch in this phase for 15-25 seconds until you are relaxed. Let yourself relax physically by mentally concentrating on the area being stretched. Do not lock your knees or bounce when you stretch. Stretch by how you feel and not by how far you can go.



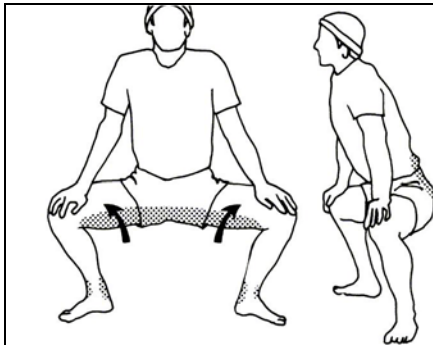
Bend your knees and return slowly to the standing position (fig 3).



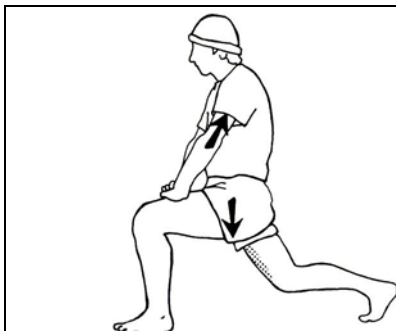
27.) From a standing position with your legs shoulder width apart, your feet flat and toes pointed to about a 15° angle. Your heels should be on the ground between 4-12 inches apart. Keep your knees to the outside of your shoulders.



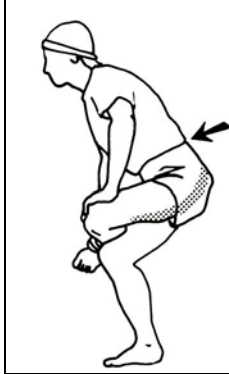
*If you have trouble staying in this position, you can squat leaning your back against a wall or hold onto something for support.* It is a great stretch for your ankles, Achilles tendons, groin, lower back and hips. Hold stretch for 20 seconds. **Be careful if you have had any knee problems. If pain is present discontinue this stretch.**



28.) Variations: From a standing position, place your hands slightly to the inside of your upper legs, just above the knees. Your feet should be at least shoulder-width apart. Slowly lower your hips downward as you gently push your upper legs outward until you feel a mild stretch in the groin area. Hold for 15 seconds. *Don't let your hips drop below your knees.*



29.) As in the drawing above, move one leg forward until the knee of the forward leg is directly over the ankle. Your other knee should be resting on the ground. Lower the front of your hip downward until an easy stretch is felt in front of the hip and possibly in our hamstrings and groin. Do this without changing the position of the knee on the ground or the forward foot. Hold the stretch for 15-20 seconds. Repeat for the other leg.



30.) To test your balance, stand on one foot with your knee slightly flexed and place the outside of the opposite leg just above your knee. Put one hand on the inside of your ankle and the other on your thigh. Now bend your knee a little more as you move your chest forward over the bent leg. This will test your balance. Hold a mild stretch for 10 seconds. Do both sides. This stretches the outside of the hip. *Do not hold your breath.* Repeat a second time.

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Victor Levant is a Montreal tango and salsa dancer, a PhD in International Relations, and Gestalt Psychotherapist. He is also the author of the Tango murder mystery Masquerade.