

CHAPTER FOUR

STANDING POSTURES

Creatures with an upright two-legged posture appeared along the coastal regions of Africa 4–6 million years ago. How this came to be is still controversial, but the posture is one of the defining characteristics of the modern human form. Another is that we are able to stand erect with minimal muscular activity in our thighs, hips, and backs. By contrast, the stance and gait of a dog or cat, or of the occasional monkey who chooses to walk upright at times on two legs, is dictated by joints in the supporting extremities that are always bent. This enables them to pounce or run at a moment's notice, but it also requires them to use muscular activity just to stand upright. The secret of our stance is simple—we can relax when we stand because we can lock our knees and balance on our hip joints without much muscular activity.

Most of us are only vaguely aware that we can balance our weight on top of the relaxed thighs, but everyone learns about knees in junior high school cafeteria lines when someone sneaks up behind you and buckles your knee as you are leaning on one leg. Your ensuing collapse shows you clearly that you were depending on the locked knee joint to hold you up and that your tormentor caught your relaxed muscles off guard.

“Locking the knees” is a phrase that has two implications: one is that the hamstrings will be relaxed, and the other is that additional extension will be stopped by ligaments. Instructors in dance, athletics, and the martial arts generally caution against this, arguing instead that the backs of the knees should never be thrust to the rear in a completely locked and hyperextended stance. Although this thinking is widely accepted in the movement disciplines, and although it is certainly sound advice for all fields of study in which whole-body standing movements must flow freely, weary mountain climbers gratefully learn about a slow, choppy, “rest step,” in which they stand for 2–4 seconds or even longer on a locked knee joint—just bones and ligaments—to save muscular effort before lifting their opposite foot onward and upward. And assuming that you are not preparing to pounce on someone at a social gathering, locking one knee is hard to fault for standing and engaging in quiet conversation first on one leg and then the other. This is a uniquely human gesture—a natural consequence and indeed the culmination of the evolution of our upright posture. An all-encompassing condemnation of the practice is ill-advised if not downright foolish.

Hatha yoga directs our attention to the knees in many postures—the sitting boats (figs. 3.22a–b), the superfish leglift (fig. 3.19b), sitting forward bends generally (chapter 6), the celibate’s pose (fig. 8.25), and the fullest expressions of many inverted poses (chapters 8 and 9), just to mention a few—in which generating tension in the hamstrings or releasing tension in the quadriceps femoris muscles to permit frank bending of the knees would alter the fundamental nature of the posture. In such cases there is nothing inherently wrong with simply saying “lock the knees.” On the other hand, movement therapists are correct in noting that such a directive all too frequently gives students permission to absent themselves mentally from the posture. Rather than experimenting with the nuances of partially relaxing the hamstring muscles, and of alternating this with tightening both the quadriceps femoris muscles and hamstrings at the same time, students often take the lazy way out by simply locking their knees. They might remain unthinkingly in a sitting forward bend for several minutes using a combination of tight quadriceps femoris muscles and relaxed hamstrings, or they might hyperextend their knees in a standing forward bend and support the posture with no more than bony stops and ligaments. The result: they end up in a few minutes with a sense of vague discomfort in their knees. Therefore, throughout the rest of this book, I’ll acknowledge the current preferences in movement studies by referring not to locking but to extension of the knees, and I’ll suggest accompanying this at selected times with relaxed hamstrings—essentially locking the knees without using that troublesome phrase.

That we can stand with knees locked is obvious; sensing how our weight is balanced over the hip joints is more subtle. Feel the softness in your hips with your fingertips as you stand erect. Then bend forward 3–5° from the hips and notice that tension immediately gathers in the gluteal muscles to control your movement forward. Next, slowly come back up and feel the gluteals suddenly relax again just before your weight is balanced upright.

Our relatively relaxed upright posture is possible because a plumb line of gravity drops straight down the body from head to foot, passing through the cervical and lumbar spine, behind the axial center of the hip joint, in front of the locked knee joint, and far enough in front of the ankle joint to keep you from rolling over backward onto your heels (fig. 4.1). (Because the ankle joints do not lock, keeping your balance will require you to hold some tension in the calf muscles.) This architectural arrangement allows you to balance your weight gracefully from head to toe and accounts for why you can stand on your feet without much muscular effort.

The fact that we can remain in standing poses when we are relaxed, tensed, or anywhere in between often prompts spirited discussion among hatha yoga teachers. One instructor says to relax in standing postures;

another says don't for a second relax in standing postures. Both can be correct, and we'll explore how and why later in this chapter. Putting first things first, however, we'll begin with the skeleton. We'll follow that with the general principles that underlie standing postures, looking first at a few simple exercises: the mountain pose, a side-to-side stretch, an overhead stretch, a twist, three backbends, six forward bends, and four side bends. Then we'll study the more complex dynamics of triangle postures in detail. Last, we'll look at two balancing postures: the eagle and the tree.

Figure 4.33. Classic triangle. Bringing the right hand all the way to the floor will necessitate allowing the right hip to drop even further to the rear than in the case of the externally supported triangle for beginners, but at least try to keep in the spirit of a side bend rather than letting the hips swivel freely.

