

LET'S TWIST AGAIN!

Finding the natural spiral.....

*At the still point of the turning world,
neither from nor toward
at the still point
there the dance is*

TS Eliot

By Mary Paffard

We think of twisting movements—especially those of us who danced through the '60s and '70s—as invigorating and stimulating to the whole system. But, as Eliot says, there is a “still point” in this “turning world” and twists can also have a calming, serene effect when practiced with ease and grace. And there are very few—arguably none!—movements that are not twists of some sort. We are round, rotating beings and operate in three dimensions, if not more. We live on a planet that is spinning at an extraordinary number of miles per hour.

Recognizing the natural spiraling quality in poses and every day movements is an excellent place to begin. As children many of us loved to twirl and twirl with our eyes closed until we fell over, but as adults even supposedly simple turning movements like reversing the car can be hazardous. Problems arise when lose touch with the natural, internal spiral and move forcefully or only from the outer shell of the body. A quick twist of the head or an ungrounded lifting and turning movement can lead to a legacy of pain and chiropractic bills. But if you cultivate a quiet internal sense of this spiral through yoga poses, these

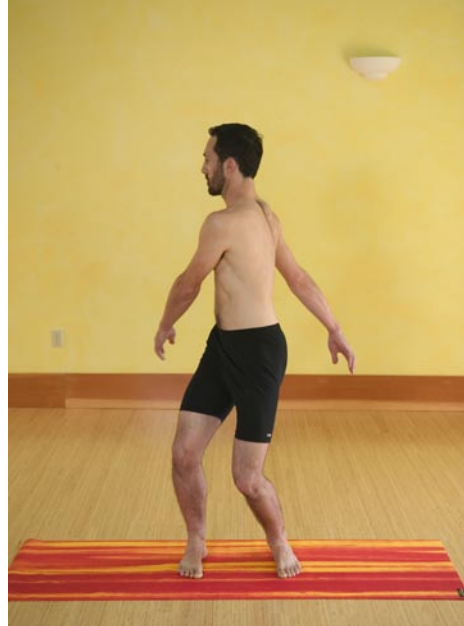
daily movements are not only enhanced and safe, but also nourishing to the spine and the whole system, especially the organs. How many back or joint problems have begun with, or been complicated by, a harsh twisting movement that had no internal integrity? This article will give you some basic principles and poses to begin to enjoy this powerful internal massage, the gentle elongation and the quiet amid the storm of our inevitably turning world.

Caution—if you have severe back problems, consult with your health practitioner before attempting these poses. Twists practiced in this way maintain the natural health of the spine but in certain back conditions, twists are contra-indicated. Pregnant and menstruating women are also advised to refrain from deep twists.

Standing Spiral Standing Twist

Stand in *Tadasana* with the feet less than hip width apart. Close your eyes and connect into your feet breathing in a relaxed manner (Fig. 1). Notice the gentle swaying that occurs





Flowing Spiral

Now that we have woken up the body a little, rooted it and created some length in the spine, it's essential to find the "music" of the twist. This exercise is a very common Tai Chi warm-up and reminds us all of how the spine delights in twisting. Standing with your feet a little wider than hip width apart, bend the knees and let the arms float 30 degrees away from the body. With relaxed breathing, using your legs and lower body, gently turn from side to side, letting the arms follow the movement of the core, so that they flap like wings around you (Figs. 4A & 4B). When you

as the body attempts to center itself without the use of the eyes. It's not very linear or predictable, is it? Lengthen through the entire length of your body and bones, imagining your spine as infinitely long, and magnetically drawn toward the ceiling. The feeling is of a true mountain, with connections into the core of the earth and tremendous altitude. You have now created the base and the axis of the twist.

Interlock the fingers and as you exhale, extend the arms above the head, letting the arms reach out of the feet. Without forcing the arms back, lengthen upward, imaging the space between each and every vertebra, the discs fattening with each breath (Fig. 2). This will give you the necessary length. Without the length your twist will be very restricted.

Keeping the pelvis stable, on the next exhale initiate a turn from the abdominal area to the right. Bring the belly back a little without overly gripping, just supporting the spine and then, use the belly to turn your core to the right with each exhalation (Fig. 3). On each exhalation, soften a little and lengthen. After a few breaths, return to center and release the arms. Before you go to the other side, close your eyes and explore the sensations that have occurred. Which side feels more alive? More round? More juicy? If you force the twist, there will be a jangling feeling in the nervous system, so it's helpful to take occasional pauses like this and get a sense of the fruits of the pose before rushing on. In this way you cultivate the tranquility amid the turning.

have eased into a rhythm, experiment with having the arms higher and lower and focusing on different parts of the body as you spiral and sway. After a minute or two, gradually lower the arms and slow the movement down as if you were in slow motion. Quietly come back to *Tadasana* (Fig. 1) and explore the echo of the spiral in the stillness.

Chair Twist

Sit on the side of the chair, with the spine lengthened and your hands resting on the thighs (Fig. 5). Think of the base of your pelvis as the feet of the pose. Imagine your sitting bones have grown new legs that go down below the chair! This will immediately create a downward and upward sensation in the body. If you are tall, put a block under your pelvis, so that the knees remain lower than the pelvis. You need a firm base to begin the movement. Experiential anatomy teacher, Susan Brnum, talks of the base of the pelvis and/or perineum as being like a lazy Susan in the twists. The image of a compact disc





return to center. If you are a true beginner, it's suggested that you do not hold twists for long. Close the eyes and as in Fig. 3, take a moment to simply explore the sensations of

may work better for some. You may laugh but this imagery is extremely helpful to allow the twist to commence from the base. When problems occur in twists, it's often because the whole spine isn't integrated in the pose and only one or two parts are dominating the movement. Continuously coming back to the base creates an effortless and balanced twist.

Moving from the "lazy Susan"—eyes closed helps with this—spiral the base toward the back of the chair slowly. Bring your hand onto the belly and slide the skin of the belly toward the back of the chair, encouraging the twist to come from the intestines and lower abdomen (Fig. 6). Notice how easy it is for the upper body and head to want to take over. If you want to limit the movement and joy in a twist, work from the head down rather than the base up.

Little by little feel the spiral creeping up your body until it feels natural to bring your hands to rest on the back of the chair (Fig. 6). Relax the neck and float the head—don't let it lead you around. With eyes quiet or closed, notice the length of the spine and connection to base on the inhale and on the exhale; see if there is more space to move into. Relax the arms. Don't go to your maximum; always leave a little wiggle room. When you open a bottle of wine, you jiggle the cork back and forth to open it. Gently spiraling in micro-movements to left and right and then extending upward, creates a calm and free spine. Think of the twist as an unwinding rather than a winding up. Notice in Fig. 6, Mark has allowed his right knee to move forward of his left to give a tad more freedom in the pelvis. After a few breaths,

that internal spiral before going to the other side.

As a neutral pose and a way of extending the whole spine, sit in the center of the chair and release forward from the hips, and hang, letting the spine find its true length (Fig. 7). For those who are tighter or heavysset in the abdominal area, use another chair with a bolster to support the spine as in Fig. 8.

Bharadvajasana

Sitting raised up on a firm surface, bend the knees to the right and have the feet to the left. Notice how the model's top shin crosses his bottom sole. Connecting into the base, lengthen the spine and bring the left hand to the outside of the right thigh and the right hand behind to support the spine (Fig. 9). If you are raised up very high, you may need to use a block under that hand.

Relax the arms; they are not vices. In fact, jiggle the upper body and then, on an exhale, begin moving from the perineum or lazy Susan toward the right, using the belly for support. Use each inhale to root down and each exhale to gently unravel to the right. Try the cork jiggle and avoid going to 100%. When one forces the twist, it charges the kidney, adrenal area, which stimulates the sympathetic nervous system and often leads to a jazzy feeling and minimum internal ease. After a few breaths, return to center and spiral the arms to the other side to experience the counter twist and a wonderful sense of breadth across the back body (Fig. 10). Exiting, stretch the legs out, pausing,





closing the eyes to reap the harvest of the pose before continuing on to the second side.

Supine Roll

Lie on the ground with your knees bent and your feet close together. Take your arms out to the sides (Fig. 11). Close your eyes and dive into the sense of length through the spinal column. Imagine the column is empty and that you are going to twist from the side bodies without compromising the sense of internal space you have created. As you let the knees fall to the right, the whole spine ripples in response as the head quietly rolls to the left (Fig. 12). If any discomfort is felt in the back, use a cushion under the legs as in Fig. 13. Let the body relax into this more passive pose, softening and letting go in the organs and the limbs and allowing the internal sense of freedom to emerge. Use your feet to raise the legs as you transition over to the other side. Repeat if you wish, staying five-six very relaxed breaths on each side.

To complete the practice, hug the knees into the chest and gently rock and roll, massaging the spine (Fig. 14) and preparing the body for a few minutes in *Savasana* or Relaxation Pose (Fig. 15). As you move through your day, find the still point amid the dance of each aspect of existence and become aware of the natural liquidity of the spine. And as you reverse the car, begin with the lazy Susan!

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(All photos taken at Piedmont Yoga Studio in Oakland, CA. Sunset yoga mat furnished by Hugger Mugger, www.huggermugger.com)

