

TWISTS

By Richard Rosen

INTRODUCTION

The next time it's your turn to wash the dishes, you can turn the chore into a short lesson on one of the important the effects of yoga twists. Scrub a few dishes with your sponge, then squeeze as much of the soapy water out of it as you can. As you release your hand pressure, hold the sponge under the running faucet until the sponge soaks up its capacity of fresh water.

What's this have to do with twists? Think of the sponge as one of your abdominal organs, say the liver (which is located just under your diaphragm, in the upper right side of your abdominal cavity). When you twist your torso, you compress your liver, very much like your hand squeezed the sponge. All the "dirty water"—accumulated toxins and whatnot—is squeezed out of the organ; then, when you de-rotate your torso back to neutral, it's akin to releasing your pressure on the sponge: just as fresh water saturates the sponge, fresh blood and other nutrients saturate the purified liver.

B.K.S. Iyengar has coined the phrase "squeeze-and-soak" to describe what happens to certain organs (along with the liver, the spleen, pancreas, prostate, bladder, and the large and small intestines) when you twist and untwist your torso. Yoga tradition maintains that twists help improve digestion by stimulating the "fire in the belly," called *samana vayu*, the "middle breath" localized in the region of the navel, and ward off diseases (see the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* 1.26-27).

And that's not all. What's sometimes overlooked is that twisting squeeze-and-soak also has a salubrious effect on the little spongy disks that separate the 24 moveable bones (vertebrae) of your spine. These intervertebral disks, which make up about 40 percent of your spine's total length, and can be compared to your car's shock absorbers, are often compared, rather inelegantly but nonetheless temptingly, to jelly-filled pastries: each disk consists of a thick, fibrous covering with a soft, jelly-like interior.

There's no direct blood supply to our disks; instead when we move our spine, we squeeze the disks and then soak them passively with blood (a process technically called imbibition). If our lives are largely sedentary, the disks don't receive enough nourishing blood, and as we age their delicious jelly nuclei tend to dry out and shrink—a prime reason why older folks are often shorter and stiffer than they were in their salad days. Of course, the solution is simple—keep moving—and what better way to do that than with yoga asanas, not only twists, but all the different kinds of postures?

We should also note here, though we're focused on the benefits of squeeze-and-soak, that twists strengthen and stretch your spinal muscles; stretch your shoulders and hips; stretches your intercostal muscles (the short muscles between your ribs), which improves breathing; and improve the function of your heart and lungs.

HOW MANY TWISTS?

There are actually more twists in the asana menagerie than you might realize. Two of the two dozen or so standing poses, Revolved Triangle Pose and Revolved Side Angle Pose, are indubitably twists; but several others, such as Triangle Pose, while

not obviously so, are also twists. A few of the sitting forward bends, like Head-to-Knee Pose, involve slight twists. Both Head Stand and Shoulder Stand and several of the arm-balance poses (like Crane Pose) have twisting variations. There are about a dozen sitting or reclining twists, about half of which are appropriate for beginning and advanced beginning students. Many of the rest involve the cool-looking but problematic Half Lotus Pose, definitely *not* a beginning-level position.

Rather than detail one or more of these available twists, I'd like to focus on three principles behind all the twists. Once practiced and assimilated into your movement repertoire, you can apply these principles to any of the twists.

TWIST PRINCIPLES AND PREPARATION

All twists are based on three main principles:

1. First, prior to moving into any twist, always lengthen your spine.
2. Second, always initiate the twist from your sacrum (at the base of your spine and back of your pelvis). Remember that your head accepts the twist from the bottom up, and never initiates or leads the twist.
3. Third, always soften your inner groins (where your inner thighs join the base of your pelvis) to receive the twist.

Following are three preparatory exercises, each one teaching one of the twisting principles, and a generic twist in which we'll put the three principles into practice. You'll need some props: a heavy bag, which typically weighs 10 pounds; a yoga block, preferably made of foam (because it's more comfortable to lie on, though wood is OK); and a metal folding chair.

EXERCISE ONE: LENGTHEN YOUR SPINE

It's important to distinguish at the outset between lengthening your spine and straightening your spine. Despite what you may read in some instructional manuals or popular magazines, you never want to literally "straighten" your spine and remove its four natural curves. "Lengthening your spine" means to create as much space as possible between the individual vertebrae *without* flattening your spine's natural curves. If you shorten your spine, as happens, for example, when you let your torso slump, you erect a nearly impassable twist roadblock; but when you open the intervertebral space, you allow for the maximum possible twist (for your capacity).

So lie on your back, knees bent, feet on the floor, with the bag positioned on the floor above your head. Inhale your arms overhead and onto the floor, extend your elbows fully, and slide your hands and wrists below the bag. Spread your palms and press the bases of your index fingers into the bag's weight. Keep the tops of your shoulders soft, don't let them ride up to your ears.

Push your feet against the floor, lift your pelvis an inch or two, and lengthen your tail bone toward your heels. This is, of course, an imaginary movement; you can't physically lengthen your tail, although by pretending you can you'll feel your lower back stretch and release toward the floor. Then lower your pelvis back to the floor and pin your tail in place. Inhale your legs straight out onto the floor, one at a time, and rotate your upper thighs slightly inward. Reach through your heels and keep your legs active throughout the exercise, but without hardening your groins or belly.

Now lift the bottom rim of your rib case away from the top rim of your pelvis. Normally students try to do this by mistakenly shoving their front ribs toward the ceiling, which actually shortens the lower back and hardens the upper belly. Needless to say, we don't do it this way. Instead, lift your *back* ribs away from your pelvis, while you sink your front ribs toward the floor. Feel how the bell-shaped structure of your ribs lifts evenly away from the bowl-shaped structure of your pelvis, narrowing the entire circumference of your waist, just like the neck joining the upper and lower chambers of an hourglass. This is exactly the kind of length you want to create before you move into any twist. Hold for a couple of minutes.

If you want to take this exercise a bit farther, slide your pelvis and legs to your left and reach actively through your right arm, stretching the entire right side of your body. Hold for a minute or two, return to neutral, then repeat for your left side with your pelvis and legs to the right. To finish, slide your hands out from under the bag, draw your thighs to your belly with an exhale, and give yourself a congratulatory hug.

EXERCISES TWO AND THREE: INITIATE FROM THE SACRUM AND SOFTEN THE INNER GROINS

Exercises two and three are economically performed conjointly. Still on your back, put your feet on the floor and again lift your pelvis, and slide the block below your sacrum. There are two ways to position the block. You can set its long axis parallel to your spine (and along the vertical midline of the sacrum), the block will press more directly on and you'll get a better feel for your sacrum; however, this position is slightly unstable, and it isn't recommended for anyone with sacrum problems. Alternatively, you can set its long axis perpendicular to your spine (and across the sacrum's vertical midline); here you'll be more stable, but the block won't press as directly against your sacrum.

Whichever position you decide on, lower your pelvis onto the block, release your knees off to the sides, press your soles together, and draw your heels comfortably toward your pelvis (this is called *supta baddha konasana*, Reclining Bound Angle Pose). Now rock gently from side to side, holding each side for a few seconds. When you rock and hold to the left, the edge of the block will press more firmly against the left side of your sacrum; as it does, imagine that half of the bone pressing more deeply into the back of your pelvis. As with the lengthening of your tail, this is an *imaginary* movement, not a physical one. But this is the twist's "trigger": from the left-half sacrum, twist your torso slightly to the right. Feel the spiral movement along your torso to your right shoulder. Then rock and hold to the right to practice a left twist.

Here then is a basic twisting principle: when you twist to the RIGHT, initiate the movement from the LEFT side of your sacrum; conversely, initiate a LEFT twist from the RIGHT sacrum. Rock back and forth a few times until you've illuminated the two sides of your sacrum and have some sense of how it roots the twist.

Finally, gradually decrease your rocking until you come to a complete stop, balanced squarely on the block. Feel how the block presses your sacrum evenly into the back of your pelvis. Against this (imaginary) movement, drop your inner groins toward the floor. Be sure *not* to help this movement along by pushing your knees floorward; that will just harden your groins and belly. Instead float your knees toward the ceiling, as if filled with helium. If you move from the groins first, the knees will follow, just as Mary's lamb followed her to school.

To come out of the pose, use your hands to press your thighs together and stand your feet on the floor. Inhale your pelvis off the block, slide the block to one side, and lower your pelvis to the floor. Give yourself another congratulatory hug.

PRACTICE TWIST

Now sit on your chair with your right side to the chair back. Set your heels straight below your knees so your shins are perpendicular to the floor and that your thighs parallel to each other. Inhale and lengthen your spine; to help with this movement, anchor your thighs heavily against the chair seat and lengthen your tail to the floor. Then recreate the lift of the first exercise above. Again feel how your waist narrows as your rib case separates evenly from your pelvis.

Next find your left sacrum (you can touch it with your left palm if you need some tactile aid). Press it into the back of your pelvis and, as you soften the groins—especially the right groin—twist to your torso to the right. Take hold of the sides of the chair back and lift your elbows up and out, akimbo; imagine that you're pulling the chair back apart. Each time you inhale now, lengthen your spine a bit more, and with each exhale turn a bit more. Most beginning students tend to twist from the lower ribs because they're not in contact with their sacrum. But if you've initiated from the sacral root, you'll feel your pubic bone digging lightly into your right groin and your lower *belly* turning. You can turn your head to the right, the same as your torso, or for a little excitement, turn it to the left, against the torso's twist. Hold for 1 to 2 minutes, release with an exhale, and repeat for the same length of time to your left.

I should caution those of you with a neck injury not to complete the twist with your neck and head. It's better to keep your head in a neutral position until the injury clears up.

Now you can apply these foundation principles to a formal standing twist like Revolved Triangle or sitting twist like Lord-of-the-Fish Pose (*matsyendrasana*). You might take a key word from each principle and string them together for a simple twisting mantra: Lengthen, Soften, Root.