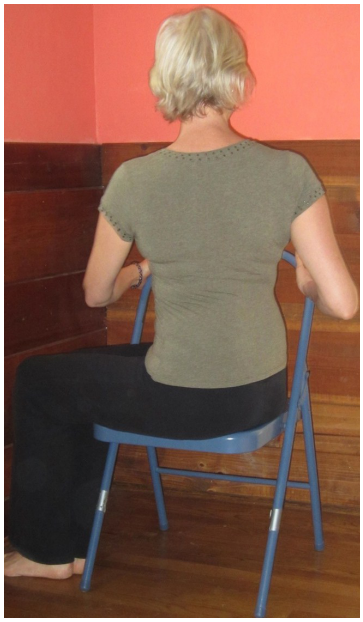
Yoga for Dancers ~ Twists for Spinal Freedom

by Anna Rain

Back in the old days, before I had a consistent and directed yoga practice, sometimes I would sleep funny and wake up with a stiff neck (it still happens, but now the incidents are years—and not weeks—apart). When my neck hurts, the action that seems most challenging is…parallel parking. Cranking my head around? Ow. But if I twist my entire torso and not just my head, well, hey, it's not so painful. As we age, any part of our body that is not unfurled and shaken to get the dust out becomes hard and dry. The spinal column houses the superhighway of energy and nerves that keeps us wired and connected to our extremities. Twists keep the spinal column unfettered, which helps the infrastructure of the nervous system stay clear of impingements. Twists also cleanse and activate the kidneys and the abdominal organs, flushing the system of the normal buildup of toxins in the same way you might squeeze a sponge. Many people find relief from backaches in a regular practice of twists. A flexible, supple spine more readily absorbs the shocks we experience from walking and dancing, which keeps unexpected jarring motion from hitting us in our more tender hip and knee joints.



Twisting the whole torso: if this is not a regular part of your body-care regimen, likely your spine is not as fluid and flexible as it could be, and that inhibits your range of motion in many areas. If you're a musician—of course, if you sing or play winds, but even if you play percussion or strings—your ribs need freedom to provide space for the lungs which give you breath, the coin of your realm. If you dance and your spine doesn't twist freely, you'll notice that your hips take the brunt and will ache more and your neck will be sore and stiff more frequently. The remedy? Twists!

Two concepts are important to understand before embarking on spinal twists: 1) Go easy. Subtle movement will have a deep effect if done properly, and if you work gently, you'll become more intimate with your capabilities and less likely to strain or injure yourself. 2) Protect your sacroiliac (SI) joints. To find your SI joints, take your fingers to the two dimples on your low back. These are where your sacrum (the triangular bone at the base of your spine) meets your ilium (your pelvis) (see top photo). The SI joint has a very slight amount of mobility, but for it to function healthily, it must be stable. Any twisting you do (without the guidance of a trained body worker in your presence) should bring the pelvis along with the spine so the SI joints are not strained or destabilized.

A seated twist is the easiest twist to incorporate into your life. Sit sideways with your right side to the back of a medium to low-backed chair, with knees together and spine lifted and straight. Adjust accordingly to make the thighs parallel to the floor: if your thighs slant down (i.e., your knees are lower than your hips), rest your feet on two equally thick books; if your knees are higher than your hips, sit on a folded blanket that covers the seat of the chair. Notice that both sides of your chest are equally long and lifted: maintain this evenness in the twist. The axis of your spine is the tailbone to the base of the skull. Keep that line long and vertical.

With an inhalation, draw your spine up (but keep your shoulders relaxed!), and as you exhale, turn to the right, toward the chair back (lower photo this page, upper photo next page).

- Let your left knee move slightly forward—straight ahead from the left hip: that's an indication that your right SI joint is stable and moving with the pelvis and the spine.

- Press your right hand on the back of the chair to deepen the twist; with your left hand, pull gently to draw your left ribs further around toward the right (lower photo next page shows left knee forward and position of hands).

- Turn from the base of your spine and move up:

abdomen from left to right, waist from left to right, low ribs from left to right, middle chest from left to right.

- Roll your shoulders easily away from your ears and release the skin of your back down toward your waist.

- Align your nose with your sternum, the center of your chest: this ensures that the twist involves the whole spine and not merely your neck. In a twist to the right, when we look over our right shoulder, we feel like we're moving a lot, but in this case, only the head and neck are mobile and not the entire spine (cf. cranking your head to parallel park).

- Take your attention to your thoracic spine—in between your shoulder blades—and bring that part of the spine in, toward the front of the chest.

- Draw the right side of the rib cage in toward your mid-line, then take the right ribs back, further to the right.

- Lift the left ribs away from the left hip (don't lift your left shoulder! Keep it soft and relaxed and released down the back), and bring the left ribs forward, around to the right.

- Remember: a subtle, correctly-performed action is infinitely better than an action that feels big and dramatic but is wrong and potentially injurious.

- Use your breath: with each inhalation, make the spine longer and taller; with each exhalation, deepen the twist from the base of the spine up.

- As you get more familiar with how your body responds, and you are confident that you're following all the previous guidelines, allow the neck gently to receive the twist originating from the base of the spine: the neck follows the spiral rising from the tailbone, extending the twist all the way up to the base of the skull and thence to the crown of the head.

To come out of the pose, exhale and return your spine to neutral, and take a few moments to feel symmetrical and even. Any time we do an asymmetrical pose, we pause in between sides to re-establish the balance and symmetry of our body. Sit facing forward in the chair, with your buttock bones near the front edge. Lift the spine, draw your abdomen gently in and up, and notice how each side of your body feels. Often after doing a twist to one side, our body yearns to even out by twisting to the other side.

Now swing your legs around to sit sideways in the chair with your left side toward the chair back, and repeat all the instructions, this time to the left.

Twisting twice to each side (right, left; then right, and left again) is even better. The second time a pose is practiced, the body has a clearer idea of what to do and where to go, and the subtle improvements in the second iteration deepen the benefit more than twice over.

If you add only one yoga pose a day to your systematic plan of caring for your physical self, a seated twist, done mindfully, will bring increased flexibility to your spine far beyond the investment in time and attention.

Do you have a physical issue you'd like to see addressed in this column? Have previous columns left you craving more information about what happens in your body when you practice the poses? Write me at annarain4@gmail.com.

Anna Rain is a certified Iyengar yoga instructor. Her English country dance band, Hot Toddy, with Melissa Running and Edith Coakley Stowe, plays for the Stockade Assembly in Albany, New York on Sunday, April 29 (with Tom Spilsbury calling).