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meditation
mirror
of the mind

Untying knots

BY SANDY BLAINE



a sequence of twists

A consciously structured asana sequence will help you leave each practice session feeling whole and refreshed, and building variety into your sessions will energize your practice and keep you motivated. So learning how to structure and vary your hatha practice is a process of exploration that is well worth the time invested.

Following a simple regimen every day is a good way to get started, but once your practice is established, building in some variety is helpful—different asanas target different areas of the body and yield different mental and energetic benefits. Exploring how to care for yourself through your practice and learning what works for you at different times enhance your self-knowledge. And a diverse practice will also keep you motivated to return to the mat every day. Having an assortment of poses to draw on enables you to make each session meaningful and effective.

Each session should include warm-ups and cooldowns to complement the main poses, which are the focus, or theme, of your practice, and it is these main poses that determine the physical and energetic effects of each session. One way to create a varied practice is to plan a particular framework to follow each week; for example, practicing standing poses on Mondays, backbends on Tuesdays, etc. Many practitioners do this to make sure they move through all the basic categories on a regular basis. This approach works well for those who respond positively to routine. But remember that whatever the theme, you can take a more energetic or quieter approach to your practice session, depending on what you

need that day. Even the more dynamic poses, such as backbends, can be practiced with a gentler, more restorative focus by interspersing more resting and passive poses and choosing easier variations.

Another way to vary your practice is to attend to your needs as they change from day to day. Rather than dragging yourself to your mat with a list of “shoulds,” you can use the first few moments of your practice to tune in. Sit on your mat, close your eyes, and take a moment to think about why you are practicing. Over time, you will probably find that you get a variety of answers, depending on what is going on in your life and what your energy and state of mind are like on different days. Think about what your intention is in response to the motivation you discover, and what kind of practice would best serve your needs and your energy that day. For example, is it early morning and you need to jump-start your day, or have you reached the day’s end and need to unwind? Do you need your practice to help you expand your energy, to give you more strength and courage? Or do you need help focusing, centering, and connecting with your sense of inner quiet?

As your practice evolves, you will learn to match the poses to the answers you get to these questions. For example, a backbending session is appropriate when you need to energize and open more fully. Standing poses may be more beneficial when you are feeling scattered. And a >>>

asana at home

practice sequence focusing on twists, such as the one that follows, is helpful on those days when you feel that life is tying you in knots. Whether the knots are physical or mental (and usually it is some combination of the two), twists will help you unwind and will cleanse, purify, and refresh your whole system.

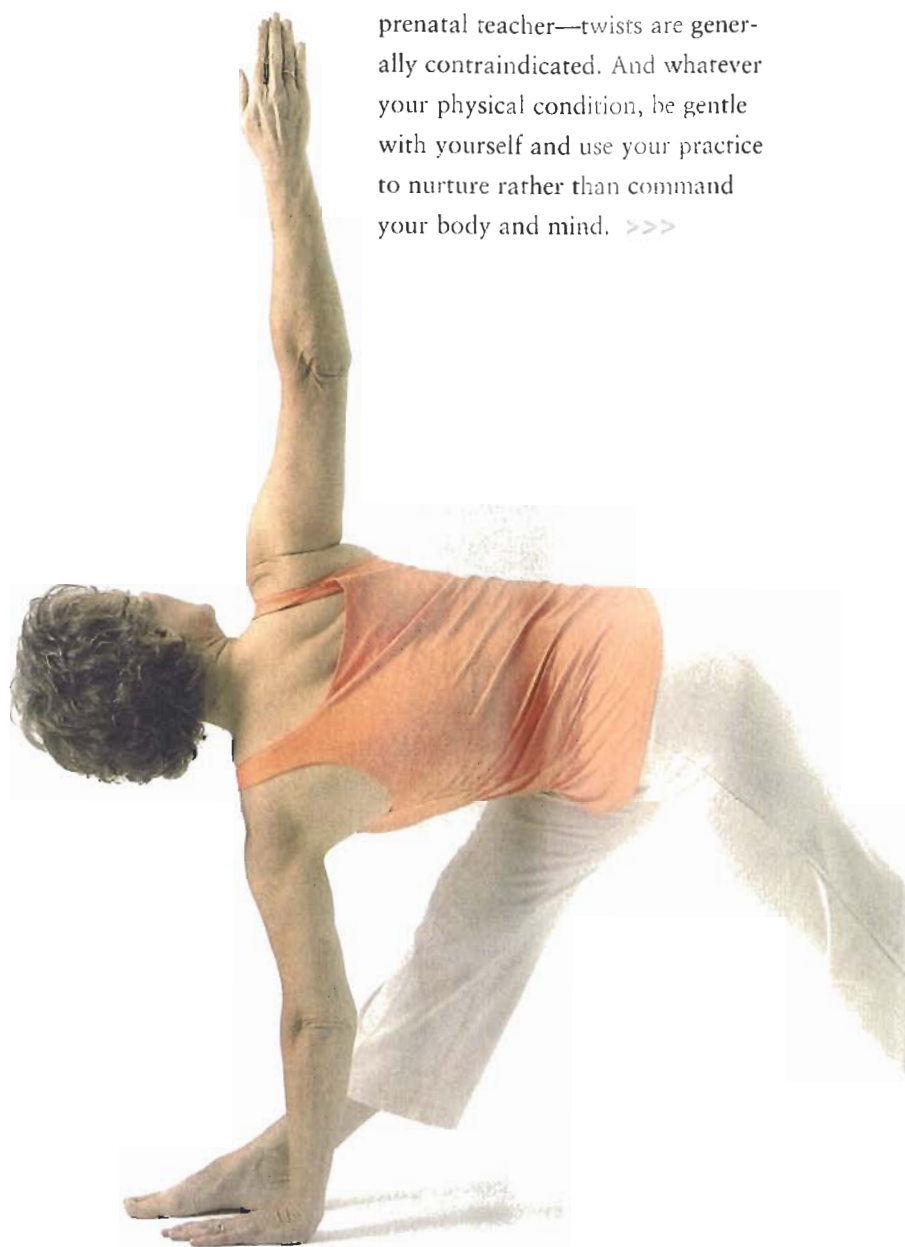
Twists

Practitioners often find twists delicious and satisfying simply because they feel so good. The physical sensation of turning the body around the spine is enjoyable and engenders a wonderful sense of release and well-being. Twists stretch the muscles of the back, chest, abdomen, and hips, promoting increased spinal flexibility and improved breathing. The compression and release of the abdomen stimulates the internal organs, improving digestion. And there is a “wringing out” aspect to twists that is cleansing and nourishing (twists are often said to release toxins from the muscles by squeezing them out like a wet washcloth). When the muscles relax after releasing from a twisting pose, they are flooded with blood and oxygen. This “squeeze-and-soak” process gives twists a purifying effect. The muscles of the back relax deeply after a twist, relieving backaches and shoulder and neck tension. This may, in turn, relieve stress-related headaches. Twists pro-

mote a youthful, supple spine and stimulate the nervous system.

The practice sequence given here is intended to help you explore the cleansing, healing benefits of twists. It is ideal for days when you need to unwind and release physical and/or emotional stress. A few cautions before you begin: we are assuming that you have been attending classes and are familiar

with the poses pictured here. If not, find a teacher who can show you the correct way to do these postures before practicing them at home. Twists are great for muscular back tension but should not be practiced by people with disc disease or other serious, joint-related spinal problems. They should also be avoided if you have a hernia or are recovering from surgery. If you are pregnant, get the advice of a qualified prenatal teacher—twists are generally contraindicated. And whatever your physical condition, be gentle with yourself and use your practice to nurture rather than command your body and mind. >>>



a twisting sequence

1



Reclined Hip Stretch ▲

The hip rotators are major stabilizing muscles; when tight, they can pull strongly on the pelvis and spine, restricting freedom of movement. Stretching these large muscles before practicing twists will allow the spine to release more easily. Keep your ankles flexed to protect the knees and breathe into the outer hip muscles as they loosen their grip on the pelvis.

2



Reclined twist ▲

Lying on your back, bring your knees toward your chest, and then over to one side. Hold for a few breaths, then change to the other side. Repeat this a few times, letting the legs and the opposite arm relax away from each other and allowing gravity to help loosen and warm the spine.

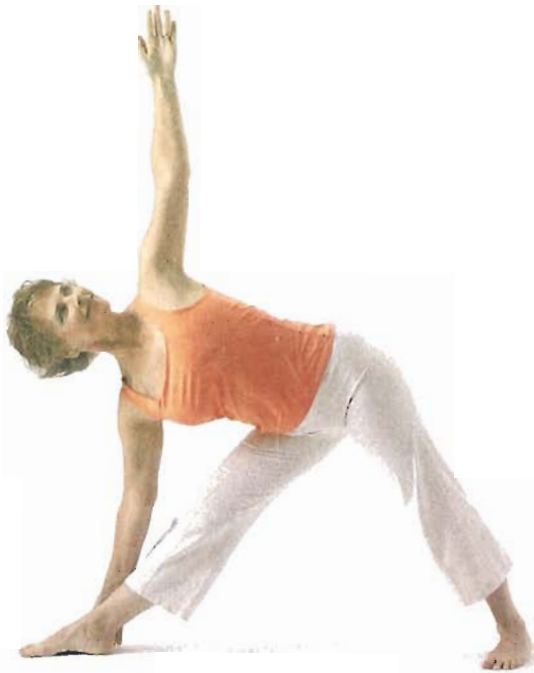
3



Downward Dog to Basic Lunge to Parshvottanasana ▲

A simple *vinyasa* (moving from pose to pose with your breath) continues to warm up the spine and opens the hip and shoulder joints. In this version of *parshvottanasana*, the hands on the floor help to support the spine as it releases over the front leg. If the hamstrings are tight, use blocks to support the hands so the legs can straighten and the back has adequate support. Hold each pose for 5 to 10 breaths, and repeat the sequence if desired.

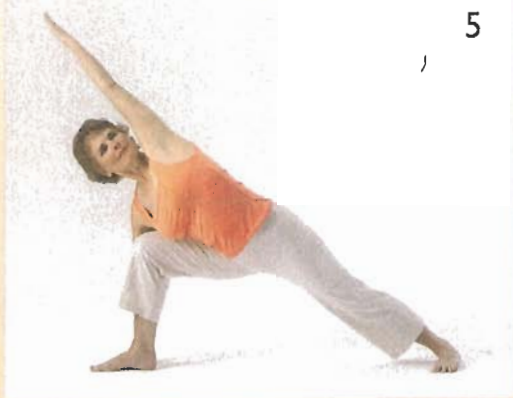
“shoulds,” you can use the first few moments of your practice to tune in.



4

◀ Utthita Trikonasana/Triangle Pose

The vinyasa warm-up will bring a greater sense of ease to the triangle pose, since the hamstrings and hips are warm and open. Firmly ground the feet and energize the legs to stabilize the pose; this will allow the spine to lengthen and gently rotate. Emphasize the twisting action by initiating the rotation from the base of the spine; feel the spine growing longer with each inhalation and continue to rotate as you exhale, allowing the movement to spiral up the entire length of the spine.



5

Utthita Parshvakonasana/Side Angle Pose ▲

This pose opens the hip rotators more fully and deepens the spinal twist. Take care to keep the front knee aligned over the heel and ankle as you turn the belly out of the front hip. Try it first with the arm reaching straight up, as in triangle, and then, when the spine is fully rotated with the heart turning toward the top arm, extend the arm alongside the head with the fingertips stretching away from the back heel on a long diagonal line.



6

Prasarita Padottanasana/Wide Leg Forward Bend ▲ (with a Twist)

Prasarita padottanasana opens the hamstrings and the adductors, and releases the hip joints, preparing the body for a variety of movements. This version also continues the theme of spinal rotation, further warming and releasing the back muscles. Try to keep the hips level as you turn to one side; this is a more stable position and provides the most effective stretch. >>>

Parivritta Trikonasana/Revolved Triangle Pose ▶

This challenging standing pose offers many benefits, including a deep hip stretch and twist. Keep the legs grounded and strong, and think about lengthening the spine more than turning it—the twist will follow as the spine lengthens and the hips release. The downward hand will help with balance, so make sure it is grounded next to the front ankle. Use a block if you can't reach the floor easily. Although in the final pose the hand crosses to the outside of the ankle, it's fine to keep the hand on the inside; don't worry about crossing it over until you are comfortable and stable in the easier position.



7

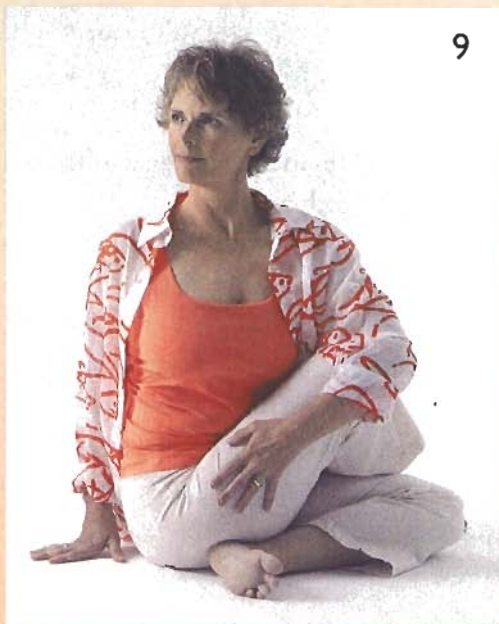
8



◀ **Bharadvajasana I/Simple Seated Twisting Pose**

Seated twists are great for releasing tension from the back muscles. This simple version is easy to learn and good for practitioners of all experience levels. If you are lopsided in the pose, support the hip on the opposite side from your legs with a firm folded blanket. When you are learning the pose, the hand on the side you are twisting toward stays on the floor to help support and lengthen your spine and keep you balanced. As the pose becomes more comfortable with practice, you can bring that arm behind your back and hold the opposite biceps. This variation is great for releasing tight shoulders as long as you work gently.

9



◀ **Matsyendrasana**

This is a deep twist requiring good flexibility. The hand on the side you are twisting toward presses into the floor to support the upward lengthening of the spine. There are two options for the opposite arm: First, simply wrap it around the top leg, as if you were giving that leg a gentle hug. Then, if you want to deepen the twist, lift the arm up and over to the outside of the top leg, allowing the triceps to press against the outer thigh.

and refresh your whole system.

counterposes & cooldowns

10



▲ Adho Mukha Sukhasana/Gentle Forward Bend

"Un-do" the twists with a gentle forward bend. Cross the ankles and release forward, letting your head rest either on a block or the floor, whichever is comfortable. To come out, press up with the support of your hands and arms, rather than pulling up from your back muscles. Cross your legs the opposite way, and repeat.

11



▲ Balasana/Child's Pose ▲

Child's pose will further relax the back muscles and help relieve any compression in the sacroiliac joints. Find a comfortable place for your arms so that your shoulders can relax completely, and let your belly soften and drop as your head rests. Find the version that is most comfortable for you; if your hips are tight, this may be resting your head on your folded arms, rather than the floor.

12



◀ Shavasana

Lie on your back and let your spine soften and relax. Feel your back expanding and releasing to the floor, and let

your consciousness float along on the rise and fall of your breath. Deeply relax in shavasana for at least 5 to 10 minutes. ●

Northern California writer and yoga teacher Sandy Blaine has been practicing yoga for 18 years and is writing a book about home practice. She teaches asana classes in the Bay Area, where she is codirector of the Alameda Yoga Station (www.AlamedaYogaStation.com), and a faculty member of the Berkeley Yoga Room's teacher-training program (www.YogaRoomBerkeley.com).