



# Karuna Yoga Newsletter

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In last month's newsletter I mentioned the postures that help to cleanse the body are all the inverted postures and the twists. The posture of the month for April was the Sun Salutation, which includes inverted postures when the head is lower than the hips. The postures to concentrate on this month are the twists, which help our bodies eliminate toxins, especially through the liver and the kidneys.

## Benefits Of Twisting Postures

Twisting postures take us deep into the spine – rotating, twisting, squeezing and strengthening. It is necessary to relax and breathe before moving into any twist whether you are standing, sitting, lying down and bending forward. Regular practice of twisting postures helps to increase the flexibility of your back and hips and can ease a painful, stiff or fused lumbar spine.

Twisting postures also massage, tone and rejuvenate the abdominal organs. The twists squeeze the liver and kidneys and then encourage fresh blood to flow into these organs. Indian yoga master B.K.S. Iyengar describes twists as a "squeeze -and-soak" action: The organs are compressed during a twist, pushing out blood filled with metabolic by-products and toxins. When we release the twist, fresh blood flows in, carrying oxygen and the building blocks for tissue healing. So from the physiological standpoint, twists stimulate circulation and have a cleansing and refreshing effect on the torso organs and associated glands.

Yoga twists involve the spine, as well as several major joints, including the hips and shoulders. In fact, full range of motion in spinal rotation is essential to many yoga poses. Unfortunately, many people lose full spinal rotation in the course of living a sedentary lifestyle. Some losses can occur if joints fuse due to trauma, surgery, or arthritis, but most range of motion loss comes from the shortening of soft tissues. If you don't lengthen the muscles, tendons, ligaments, and fascia (connective tissues) to their full length at least a few times a week, they will gradually shorten and limit the nearby joint's mobility. In the case of twisting, the limitation is usually in soft tissues around the spine, abdomen, rib cage, and hips. If you regularly practice yoga twists, there are some clear benefits to these same joints and soft tissues. Not only do you maintain the normal length and resilience of the soft tissues, but you also help to maintain the health of the discs and facet joints (the small pair of joints on the back of the spine where each two vertebrae overlap). A variation of a twisting posture sitting on a chair is an excellent option because it is so easy to integrate into everyday life.

## Posture Of The Month – Marichyasana III

This asana is dedicated to the sage, Marichi, the grandfather of Surya (the Sun God)

1. Sit on the floor in Dandasana with your legs stretched straight in front.
2. Bend the right knee; place the sole and heel of the right foot flat on the floor next to your left thigh.
3. Holding your right knee with your left hand place your right hand on the floor behind you as support. Bring your right hand as close as possible to the centre of your back and use it to straighten your back.
4. With an exhalation, turn your spine to the right. **Beginners** - wrap your left arm around your right knee.  
**Intermediates** – take your left elbow across your right knee and try to bring your knee into your armpit.
5. With every exhalation turn further to the right and finally turn your head and look over your right shoulder.
6. Do not force into the twist. Allow the twist to be relaxed and breathe well.
7. Stay in this posture for five breaths and then repeat on the opposite side.

### Benefits of this posture

- Increases energy levels
- Tones and massages the abdominal organs
- Improves the functioning of the liver, spleen, pancreas, kidneys and intestines
- Reduces fat around the waistline
- Alleviates backache
- Relieves lumbago



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## Know Your Limitations, Relax and Breathe

For years now I've been working on Urdhva Dhanurasana (Upward Bow or Wheel Pose), striving to achieve that perfect Wheel Pose that I see in my yoga books, on DVDs and in yoga magazines. 'Shouldn't my hard work be paying off?' I ask myself. 'How can others do it so beautifully?' It's true that I have improved by regular practice and with the knowledge that to breathe into the pose allows me to go deeper into it. BUT. There is no breath that will increase the rotation in my shoulders so that I can fully extend my bent elbows because, as it turns out, I've hit my limit.

Like it or not, many of us will never achieve the perfection that we may be striving for, simply because not all poses are accessible in the same way to all people. We vary in body size and proportion, age, physical condition, time for practice, and attitude. However, limitations are not a bad thing. Quite the contrary. Everybody has a limit – in hamstring length, hip openness and arm extension. Limits are what yoga is all about. In truth, my Wheel Pose will always look half-flat!

And the good thing is that it doesn't matter. Perfect poses aren't the point of yoga. The postures exist to help us understand what's going on in our bodies, to build healthy and resilient muscles, and to create skeletal alignment and joint stability and flexibility. The point is that humans are, by nature, flawed and uniquely built, so why should two people, each with their own limitations and variables, strive to look exactly the same in a given pose?

Yoga is a system that's well thought out and it offers us all kinds of lessons on mind-body awareness. A lot of that awareness is focused on alignment, not outward perfection, and there's good reason for that – an aligned skeleton, in any posture, stimulates the energy channels in the body (known as nadis) and increases the flow of prana (life force) to the joints, skeleton and muscles, keeping you healthy.

The first place where you'll feel limitations while you practice is in your muscles – perhaps a twinge in your inner thigh that tells you not to sink deeper into Warrior II. That's your body's alarm sounding off. Yet muscles are capable of stretching so how can we know how much we can stretch them without hurting ourselves? The ability to stretch a muscle is mainly limited by the nervous system's defensive reflexes. If you keep stretching a muscle after your protective reflexes kick in, the muscle will contract and tear. Relax the nervous system and the muscles can let go. Relax, breathe and back off when you first feel the twinge that signals you've reached your limit – for now. Eventually, continuing in this fashion, you will be able to stretch more without injuring yourself.

The best way to get acquainted with your limits is to keep practicing and experimenting. Use props if you need to. Remember, only when the nervous system lets go can a safe stretch occur. Let your breath be your teacher – if it becomes strained, uneven, or difficult, or if you find yourself holding your breath, then you need to ease off. If you can't find your breath then you've ceased to do yoga. Follow the breath and you'll learn a lot about your limitations. And don't forget to focus on the positive – your chest that's open, your legs that are straight, and your hips that are aligned.

Perfect poses aren't the objective in yoga: Recognise, acknowledge and embrace your own limitations, what can and cannot be changed, work within the range of what's possible for you, and above all don't get frustrated. OK, so I may never be able to do the perfect Wheel, but by accepting this I can then focus on creating a healthy alignment for my body, one that gets the prana flowing so that I feel strong, agile and balanced. Don't waste precious energy on trying to change the things that cannot be changed, have the courage to change the things that can, and have the wisdom to know the difference!

Edited from an article entitled 'Striving for perfect poses can lead to suffering, but learning to work within your limitations will set your practice free' by Hillari Dowdle, a freelance writer for yoga magazines.

## Mula Bandha – The Pelvic Floor

Teaching people about the mula bandha is very dear to my heart. I have seen friends, family members and yoga students struggle with back, hip and knee issues and be challenged by problems of urinary incontinence. When they learn how to properly engage and train their mula bandha (pelvic floor) many of their issues are resolved. A well functioning mula bandha has a deeply stabilizing impact on health and wellbeing. It is support for your internal organs, stability for your pelvis, and helps to strengthen your back.

In males the seat of the mula bandha is the perineal muscle, which is located in front of the anus and behind the genitals. In females the location is near the top of the cervix. A good way to understand its location is to imagine that you need to go to the toilet and there is none in sight. Which muscles would you use to resist this urge? Women engage these muscles to tone the pelvic floor after childbirth.

The mula bandha is also an energy lock and regulates the flow of **prana** (life force) within the energy channels known as **nadis**. When the energy is flowing through these channels it balances the nervous system.

### How to Strengthen The Mula Bandha

1. Breathe in. Pull up the mula bandha.
2. Hold the mula bandha as you breathe out.
3. Repeat this for ten breaths.
4. Try to do this six times every day. You can do this anywhere – in a car, at the supermarket, washing dishes – anywhere!