

**basics**

**parivrtta trikonasana**

*by Natasha Rizopoulos*



# Unwind *your* Spine

**THERE'S NO WAY AROUND IT:** In the canon of standing poses, Parivrtta Trikonasana (Revolved Triangle Pose) is one of the most challenging. But it provides a wonderful opportunity to build concentration and awareness—to develop the mind-body consciousness that is at the heart of yoga. Being in the present moment is hard to achieve. How many times have you been in class doing the physical practice with your mind checked out—obsessing about the past, anticipating the distant future, or even just wondering what to eat for lunch? It might be nearly impossible to silence your thoughts, but in a pose like Parivrtta Trikonasana, you can focus your attention on what's demanding, to harness your wandering mind. When you embrace the difficult elements of a pose, you will improve your ability to practice *ekagrata*, or one-pointed focus.

An important technique to learn for twists is an even distribution of the work required. The tendency for most of us is to twist where it's easy and avoid twisting where it's not. This usually means that you will overwork the neck, which is relatively mobile, and underwork the middle and upper back, parts of the spine that in many people are about as malleable and responsive as a block of cement. When you overwork an area that is already mobile

**Set up a stable foundation to get the most from this standing twist.**

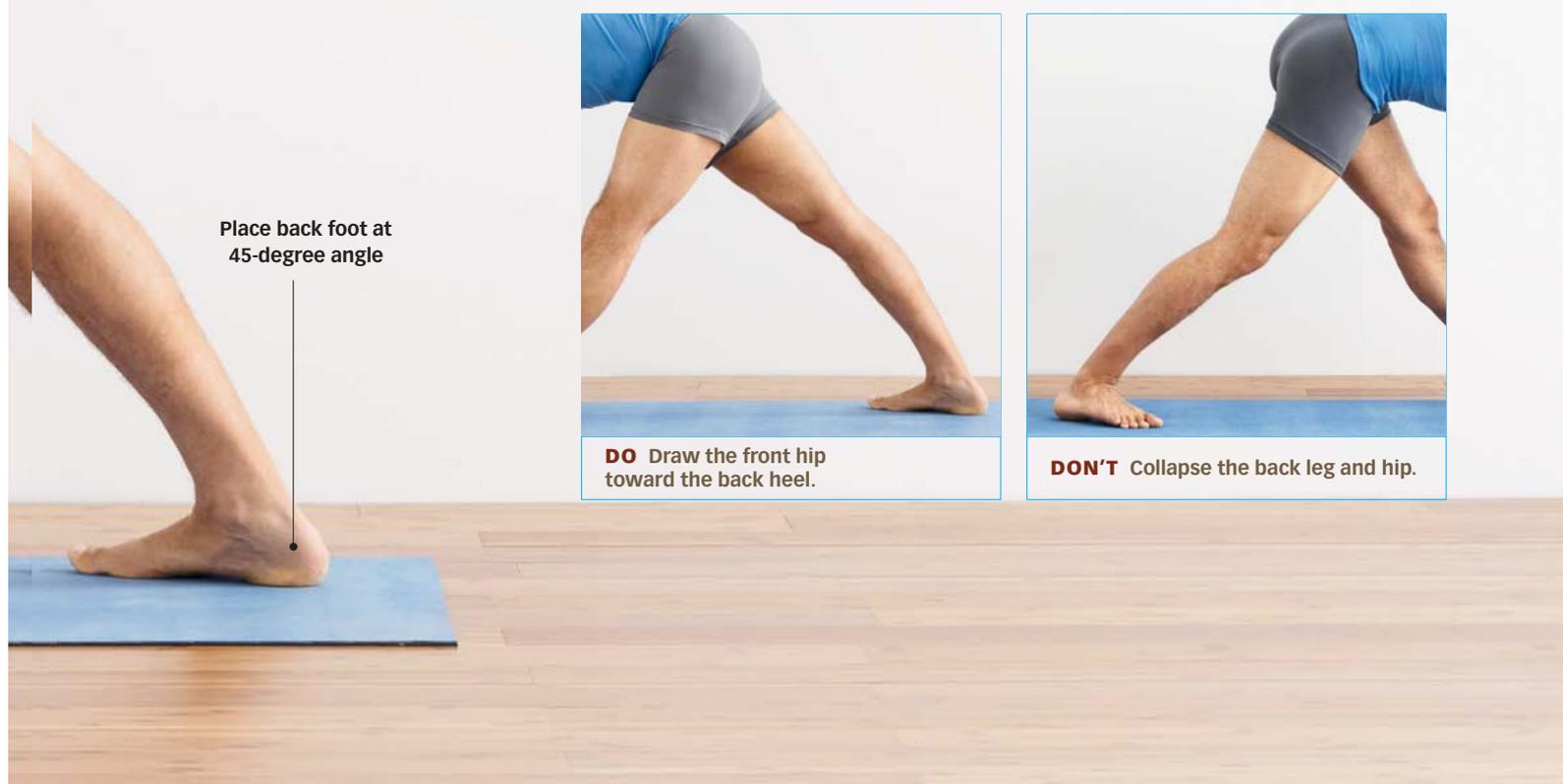




Figure 2  
(variation of  
Parivrtta  
Trikonasana)  
is described  
on page 52.

## Pose Benefits

- Tones the legs
- Releases the thoracic spine
- Invigorates abdominal organs
- Stimulates digestion

## Contraindications

- Neck vulnerability
- Hamstring injury
- Sacroiliac issues
- Pregnancy

and “open,” you make it more vulnerable to injury. However, twists like Parivrtta Trikonasana can help you bring openness and awareness to the thoracic spine, which is often lethargic. Working an area that you might normally ignore creates a perfect opportunity to observe the body and mind in relationship to practice.

### WAKING THE DEAD

As you practice Parivrtta Trikonasana, try to resist the inclination to twist in the neck and torque too much at the sacroiliac (SI) joint. Instead, focus your attention more precisely on the recalcitrant thoracic area. The following modification is a great way to learn this principle.

Face the long side of your mat with your feet parallel and about four feet apart. Place a block between and slightly in front of your feet. On an inhalation, lengthen your spine and lift your kneecaps by engaging your quadriceps. Keep this activity going in your thighs, and on an exhalation, bend forward until your torso is parallel to the floor. Put your right hand on the block, adjusting its position so that it is just beneath your nose.

Now place your left hand on your sacrum, the triangular bony spot at the

base of your spine, and adjust your hips so that your sacrum is level. The right side may want to dip, so, using your hand as a feedback mechanism to ensure that your sacrum remains level, lift the right hip by reinvigorating the right thigh and taking it back and up. On an inhalation, extend your sternum away from your navel to lengthen your spine. On an exhalation, take your left hand to the ceiling and open your chest to the left (*figure 1*).

Observe how easy it is to just “swivel” your hips rather than actually twist your spine. Instead, continue to activate your right leg so that the right hip doesn’t follow you as you twist to the left. When you create this resistance in the right leg, the action of the twist moves out of the pelvis and SI joint and into the middle and upper back, where you want it. Keep your chin in line with your sternum as you find the twist in your thoracic spine and turn your head only after you have done so, even then continuing to resist the impulse to twist your neck to its maximum. Have your left hand in line with your right and take your gaze to your left thumb, but refrain from cranking your neck. Establish a rhythm in which each inhalation makes your spine a little bit longer, and

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each exhalation gives you a bit more rotation. This breathing pattern is a crucial part of creating an expansive twist, and you'll want to practice it in the following versions as well. Take 8 to 10 breaths and then switch sides.

#### **DON'T GO ALONG FOR THE RIDE**

For this variation, place your mat perpendicular to a wall and stand near the wall with your back to it. Have a block toward the front of your mat. Turn your right toes out about 45 degrees, but keep your right heel against the wall. Step your left foot forward about four feet so that you can draw a straight line from heel to heel (*figure 2*). Place your hands on your hips and square your hips. If you can't create this alignment, you may need to shorten your stance by stepping your left foot closer to the wall. Keep the longest stance you can while also squaring your hips, as this will give you the greatest extension in your spine.

Lift your kneecaps by engaging your quadriceps as you did before. Draw your left outer hip and your right inner thigh toward the wall behind you to square your hips (these actions pull the left hip back and roll the right hip forward), and then drop your tailbone toward the floor so that you're not overarching your lower back. Keep your left hand on your left hip to remind it to stay back, and actively press your right femur (thighbone) back so that you have some juice in your back leg. On an inhalation, lengthen your spine and take your right arm up. On an exhalation, extend forward, placing your right hand on the block beneath your shoulder. Lift your left arm to the ceiling and gently turn your gaze toward your left thumb.

Remember the instructions from the first variation about not overdoing it in the cervical spine. If you feel more sensation in your neck than in your upper back, drop your gaze a bit and look straight ahead. Notice how the right hip wants to go along for the ride as you revolve to the right, creating a swivel rather than an actual spinal twist. Establish resistance by pressing your right thigh back, creating stability in the low back so that the twist blossoms in the upper back.

**HONE YOUR TWIST**

For the classical pose, take your mat to the center of the room and place your feet and legs in the same position and distance you established at the wall. Square your hips and engage your thigh muscles. Active legs are a crucial element in standing twists, as they create the stability in your foundation that facilitates freedom in the torso. Keep your left hand at your hip to firm it into the midline, and press your right femur back so that the leg doesn't collapse as you move into the twist. On an inhalation, lift your right arm to the ceiling; on an exhalation, lengthen your torso straight forward before finally placing your right hand on the floor to the outside of your left foot (see opening photo). If necessary, you can take your block to the inside of your foot, as you did at the wall. With your left hand, check your sacrum and make sure that the right side hasn't dipped dramatically. If it has, the right leg isn't counteracting the tendency to swivel. The hips won't be perfectly square, but if they go way off kilter, you miss an opportunity to explore the thoracic area. To minimize the swing in the pelvis, draw the right femur back as you pull your left hip toward your right heel. On an inhalation, lengthen through your spine; on an exhalation, lift your left arm to the ceiling and your gaze toward your left thumb.

Take a moment to observe your pose with full attention. Notice how easy it is to turn from the neck, which limits both the twist and your opportunity to grow out of your habits. Establish movement in the thoracic area so that the twist in the neck is a continuation of the rotation in the upper back rather than a replacement. In the Bhagavad Gita Krishna defines yoga as "skill in action." In a pose like Parivrtta Trikonasana, you get to embody this idea—cultivating your awareness and intelligence and acting on them both to create a twist that expands mind and body. ■

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**get twisted**

Twists have myriad benefits. Here, we count the ways . . .

- ◆ Twists release and return the spine to neutral alignment after deep forward bends and backbends.
- ◆ Twists affect the internal organs of the torso through what B.K.S. Iyengar calls a "squeeze and soak" action. The theory is that twists cleanse the internal organs in much the same way that a sponge discharges dirty water when squeezed and can then absorb fresh water and expand again. The idea is that, when you twist, you create a similar wringing action, removing stale blood and allowing a freshly oxygenated supply to flow in.
- ◆ Twists keep you long. As a result of the effects of gravity and the aging process, your vertebral disks get compressed and tend to lose moisture. The "squeeze and soak" theory described above also applies to disks, keeping them plump and healthy, and keeping you nice and tall.
- ◆ Twists tend to tone the obliques, which are the diagonal muscles in the abdomen that contract to help you rotate. When your obliques get tight, they can pull the lower ribs and pelvis toward each other, which leads to poor posture. Long, strong obliques, however, contribute to good posture.

◆ Twists can teach you to breathe under all circumstances. The breathing pattern is crucial to achieving a healthy twist, with the inhalation always used to establish length along the spine before the exhalation is used to rotate.

Sometimes students unconsciously hold their breath when they twist. Learning to breathe correctly as you practice these poses will serve you on the mat and off, making your twists more spacious and imprinting the useful life habit of breathing expansively even under challenging circumstances.

◆ Twists energize and release tension. As you rotate, see if you don't notice feelings of liveliness and vitality. The "ahhhh" moment after you come out of a twist is the psychological version of what happens physically. First you coil up, then you let go.

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