

Creating Balance

more on hips

ONE OF THE GREAT THINGS ABOUT YOGA IS THE ABILITY THAT WE HAVE, THROUGH REGULAR AND JUDICIOUS PRACTICE, TO EQUALISE POSTURAL IMBALANCES, AND WITH THEM, DEEPER IMBALANCES AFFECTING OUR HEALTH AND TRANQUILLITY. IN ISSUE THREE, I TALKED ABOUT HOW TO MOVE THE HIP GIRDLE IN SPACE TO BRING ABOUT MORE STRENGTH AND LESS PRESSURE IN THE SACROILIAC JOINT IN THE POSES. NOW I WOULD LIKE TO TALK ABOUT USING THE POSTURES TO BOTH EXTERNALLY, AND INTERNALLY ROTATE THE HEAD OF THE FEMUR (THIGH BONE) IN ITS SOCKET. **BY FLO FENTON**

What do we mean by 'hips'? This is a sometimes vaguely used and much misunderstood umbrella term in yoga! First we have the pelvic girdle (also called the pelvis, pelvic bone, or 'hip-girdle') itself, which hinges with the lower back via the sacroiliac joint. When your teacher tells you to align your hips or hip bones square on, or side on, to the wall you are facing, they are talking about the alignment of the pelvic girdle. Secondly, we have the 'hip-joints', ie. the ball (the head of the femur) and socket (in each side of the pelvic girdle) joints where the legs connect into the pelvis. When you are told that your hips are tight, or that you need to 'open your hips', it is the ability (or lack thereof) to rotate the head of the femur in its socket that is being referred to.

Yoga certainly can 'open the hips', and increasingly many classes appear to focus on this. Increasing the range of movement that we can comfortably put our joints through is one of the earliest benefits we notice from a consistent yoga practice. Increasing the range of movement and creating more space in the joint capsule means that there is a reduced risk of injury to the joint and a greater range of pain free movement in daily life. On an internal or energetic level, the ability to externally rotate the hips may correspond to how we view ourselves as sexual/creative beings. The external hip rotations are given to pregnant women to increase the ability to open in this way, which in turn, is thought to facilitate the birth process. Practicing the internal rotations

increases our sense of having firm boundaries in the sexual/creative sphere.

What I want to highlight in this article is that there are two directions in which the hip joints can be rotated. Stretching the muscles involved in rotating the femur head in one direction will not help if the restriction in movement that you have is involved in the opposite rotation. Furthermore, we need to be aware, just as we would (hopefully) not do a practice consisting only of backbends with no forward bends, to balance our external hip rotation stretches with an equal amount of internal ones. We want a practice that will create balance both posturally and energetically. Even more importantly, certain postural imbalances contra-indicate (recommended not to do) some of the postures entirely.

So, which postures externally and which postures internally rotate the hip joints and, when should you do, or not do, them?

EXTERNAL HIP ROTATIONS

External rotations are the kind of movements most commonly given in yoga classes, and the kind you will most likely be shown if you are diagnosed as having 'tight' hips. They are postures that externally rotate the head of the femur, and then stretch the external rotator muscles of the thigh, the adductor (inner thigh) muscles, and the gluteals (buttock muscles.) The ligaments that hold the head of the femur in place in its socket will also be stretched in such a way as to allow a fuller degree of external rotation. In other words, by

doing these kind of hip-stretches, you will be stretching the muscles and ligaments to allow further ability of your hip joints to rotate externally. They include *Baddha Konasana*, (cobbler pose/bound angle pose) open cross legged hip-stretch, *Janu Sirsasana*, (head-to-knee pose) all the lotus and half lotus poses, and the hip stretch that is sometimes called the 'dying swan' pose or one-legged pigeon pose. The standing poses which bring about an external rotation of the femur head in its socket are those in which the pelvis is aligned at 90 degrees (ie. sideways) to the direction of the gaze and especially those in which the front knee is bent. Examples are *Virabhadrasana 2* (Warrior 2) and *Parsvakonasana* (extended side angle pose). In both of the latter, the front hip joint will be in external rotation when the pose is done to its full extent. *Trikonasana* (triangle pose) will rotate the front hip joint to a lesser degree and *Ardha Chandrasana* (half-moon pose) will quite strongly rotate both hip joints externally, again only if done fully.

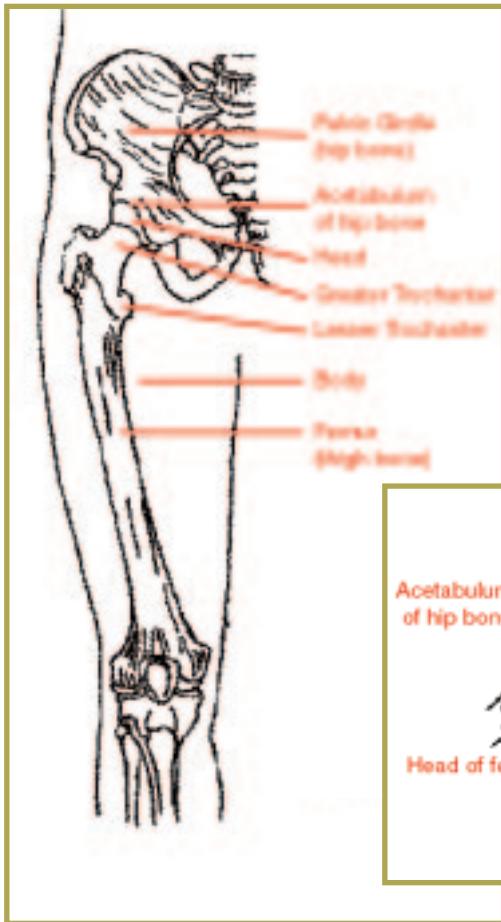
Indications

The external rotation hip-stretches are appropriate and advisable for you if:

- You have internally rotated hip joints. This is usually visibly indicated by 'knock-knees'.
- You have tight adductor (inner thigh) muscles.
- You have tight gluteal muscles. This can lead to sciatic like (shooting) pain running down the side of the leg, the back of the leg, or deep into the hip joint itself. (However, take note of *a. in the next section.)

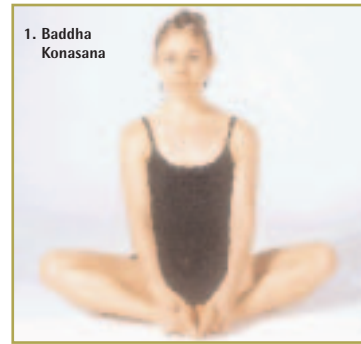
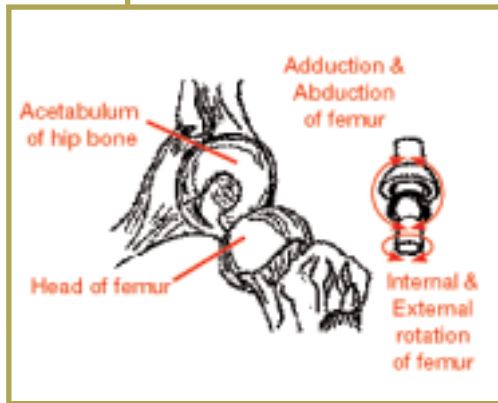
Cautions

You should think carefully about the effects of doing daily, strong or prolonged hip-stretches where the femur head is brought into external rotation if:

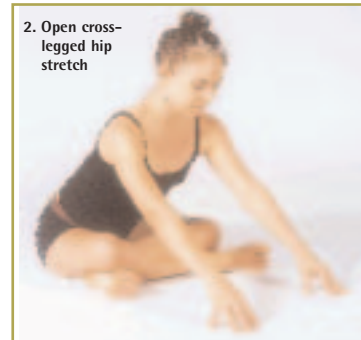


Anterior view of right femur in relation to the pelvic girdle.

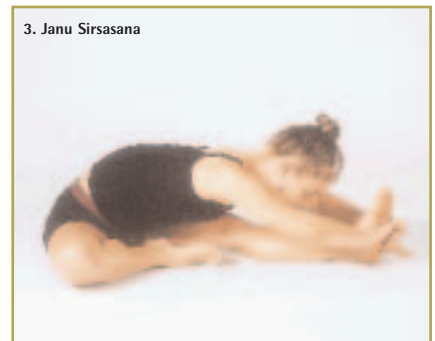
Ball and socket joint between head of femur and acetabulum of hip bone.



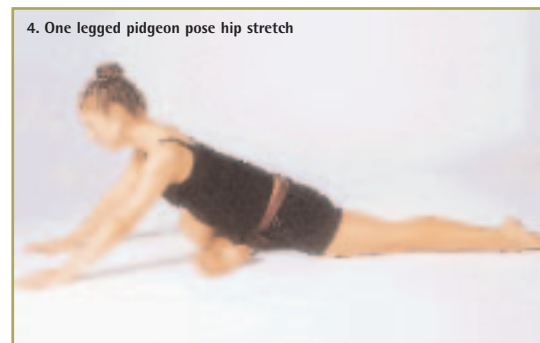
1. Baddha Konasana



2. Open cross-legged hip stretch

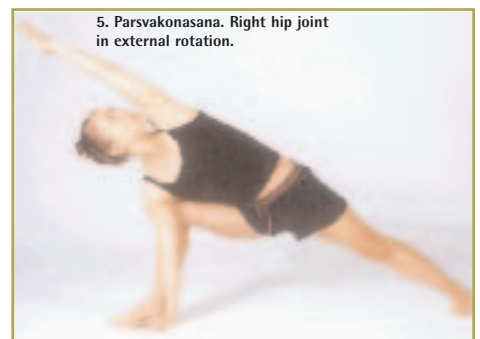


3. Janu Sirsasana



4. One legged pigeon pose hip stretch

ABOVE: Photos 1-4 show the seated postures in which one or both hip joints are in external rotation.



5. Parsvakonasana. Right hip joint in external rotation.

*A. You already have an exaggerated external rotation of one or both hip joints. This condition is very common. It is best diagnosed by an Osteopath. However, some indications of this condition are;

1. Prolonged pain and difficulty in this area, even after years of trying to 'open the hips', with these kind of stretches, often markedly more on one side.
2. Sacroiliac pain, and weak lower back.
3. Marked difficulty (out of proportion with rest of practice) in doing internal hip-rotations, more pronounced on the troublesome side if there is one.
4. The feet and knees turn out when standing. (This one won't be apparent in a long-term yogi, as we automatically turn the feet in for *Tadasana*.)

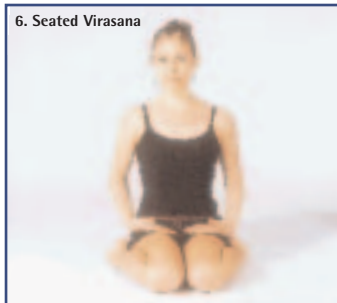
B. You think that your hips are not open enough yet because you can't get your legs behind your head. Although it may be the case that the restriction is in the

hip joints, listen to your body; do you feel it in the hips, or is there more sense of restriction in the lower back? If so, it is much more likely that you need to work on the sacroiliac joint.

INTERNAL HIP ROTATIONS

These are the postures which internally rotate the head of the femur in its socket, and thereby stretch and lengthen the muscles (and ligaments), further enabling this movement. Some of the sitting and reclining postures strongly internally rotate the hips and are key postures to practice if you are trying to increase your ability to further internally rotate the hips. They include *Supta Virasana*, (reclining hero pose), seated *Virasana* (hero pose), *Triang Mukhaikapadha Paschimottanasa* (half hero-pose seated forward bend) and *Gomukasana* (cow face pose). A lying twist with the legs crossed will achieve a nice stretch of the ligaments, which if tight, may restrict the internal hip rotation. (See photos.)

None of the basic standing poses strongly internally rotate the hips except *Garudasana* (eagle pose). However, those in which the femur head is neutral and may be slightly



6. Seated Virasana



7. Triang Mukhaikapada Paschimottanasana. Using a blanket under the sitting bone of the straight leg to elevate the pelvic bone on that side.



8. Supta Virasana. Using bolsters and blankets, and the knees slightly apart. More bolsters can be used to make the pose easier to go into, and a blanket under the sacrum helps to decrease the 'hinging' of the lower back.



9. Supta Virasana using a belt to keep the knees together, giving a strong internal rotation to both hip joints.



10. Knees together, feet wide apart. This is an easy and safe pose which supports the sacro iliac joint (lower back) whilst giving an internal hip joint rotation.

internally rotated, especially in beginners, are those in which the hip-girdle is aligned forwards, ie. square on to the direction of gaze. These include *Virabhadrasana 1* (Warrior 1), *Padottanasana* (wide-legged standing forward bend), *Parivrtta Parsvakonasana*, (revolved side angle pose), *Parivrtta Ardha Chandrasana* (revolved half moon pose) and *Virabhadrasana 3* (flying warrior pose). These postures are good to practice if one is avoiding the external hip-rotations due to excessive ability to externally rotate the hips.

Indications

The internal hip rotation postures are suitable and advisable for you if:

- a. You have an exaggerated external rotation of one or both hip joints. (See cautions A* page 39 for signs and symptoms.) The great thing about yoga is that it can be used to correct imbalances. If you find that you have these signs and symptoms, start doing your internal hip rotations! Chances are you've been avoiding them because they're hard, correct?! If you find that one side is markedly harder than the other, do that side twice, or for twice as long. *Supta Virasana*, (reclining hero pose) using as many props as necessary (see photos) will be your best ally, as well as *Viparita Karani* (legs up the wall) using a strap tightly clasp the thighs just above the knee joint together. (This will rotate the femur heads inward, and gradually reverse the condition over time.)

- b. You want a practice that will be balanced. If you are doing lots of external hip rotation stretches and no internal ones, you are creating an imbalance that may have myriad repercussions.

Cautions

You may need to approach these poses more carefully if:

- a. They make your knees sore.

Unfortunately, those who most need to do the *Virasana* and half *Virasana* poses to correct a restriction in the ability to turn the thighs in, are the ones for whom the knees will become the 'weakest link' in these poses, resulting in strain to the knee ligaments. However, don't despair or give up! This is what props are for!

When doing *Supta Virasana*, use as many bolsters and blankets as necessary behind the back to prevent strain in the knees. Eventually, we are working towards having the knees together, even using a belt around thighs just above the knees to get that internal rotation, and the feet close beside the hips, tops of the feet flat on the floor. To begin with however, to avoid straining the knees (which we want to avoid at all costs, as they take a very long time to heal) let the knees come apart a bit, and the feet come out from the hips a bit. To prevent that strong hinging of the sacroiliac joint and compression in the lower back, use a blanket folded into a pad to help prop-up the back of the sacrum and lengthen the lower back.

In seated *Virasana* (hero pose) use a folded blanket or a bolster (or even two bolsters) beneath the buttocks. Again let the knees come slightly apart. In *Triang Mukhaikapada Paschimottanasana* (half-hero pose seated forward bend), if you seem to be tilting the hips and collapsing over the straight leg, place as much padding as is necessary under the sitting bone of the straight leg to level the hips. Let the knee in *Virasana* come out a bit from the other one if needed to begin with. Just sitting up in the pose may feel strong enough, so only come forwards if there is no pain in the knee at all and only work in the pain-free range if you do.

- b. You have internally rotated hip joints. Due to the shape of the bones, and the anatomical restrictions on the internal rotation of the hip joint, these poses are unlikely to make the condition worse. However, if you are aware of an imbalance, it is always desirable to work on evening it out. So, although you don't have to avoid the internal rotations, if given the choice in a class of ten minutes in *Supta Virasana* (reclining hero pose) or *Baddha Konasana* (cobbler pose) for example, you would be wise to choose the latter.

In summary, I would like to invite you to use your practice to create more balance in the workings of your body and mind. When we approach our practice with a fixed goal, we

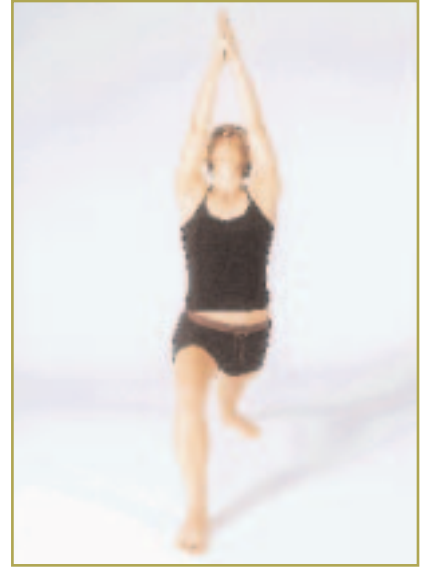
ABOVE AND NEXT PAGE. Photos 6-12 show the sitting and reclining poses which bring one or both hip joints into internal rotation.



11. Cross legged lying twist. This pose stretches the ligaments involved in the internal rotation of the hip joints.



12. Viparita Korani with a belt tied above the knees will internally rotate the hips.



13. Virabhadrasana I. Compare this standing pose where the pelvis aligns forward to Parsvakonasana (photo 5) which aligns the pelvis sideways, and gives a strong external hip joint rotation to the front hip joint.

can miss (sometimes for years!) what the body is trying to tell us, and hence the opportunity to change. All challenges that we face in our practice are like nuggets of truth shining a light on some blockage in our understanding giving us the opportunity to more clearly see who we truly are. So, never get discouraged; get inspired!

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