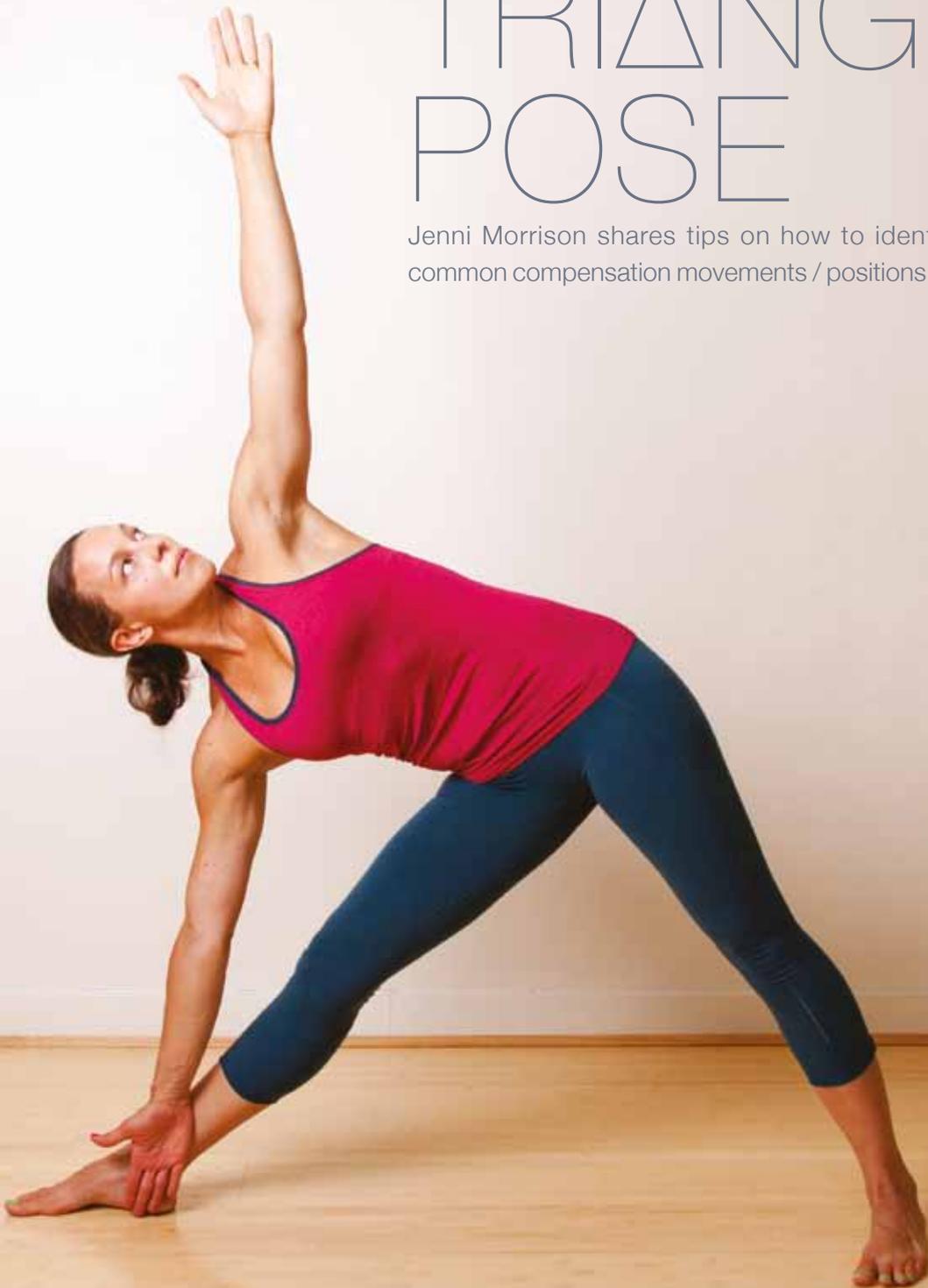


Improve your  
TRIANGLE  
POSE

Jenni Morrison shares tips on how to identify and avoid common compensation movements / positions in Trikonasana



While moving through physical postures, ideally we develop body awareness; however there are sometimes unwanted habitual movements that fly under the radar of our awareness. These unwanted actions or *compensations* are simply the body's way to try and maintain balance in the pose. If the strength required is lacking, other muscles will take over. This will keep the weak muscles weak and tighten the overworked muscles. If the mobility is lacking in one set of joints, other joints will need to move more, especially if the pose is deepened. This will keep the tight joints tight, and destabilise the joints that need to move excessively. The key to change is awareness. By becoming aware of these compensations, you can prevent the incorrect muscles doing unwanted actions, and therefore start building strength and mobility where required.

When a normal movement pattern has not been established, or is unavailable due to injury or inflexibility in a particular area of the body, yoga students habitually use compensatory movement patterns to maintain balance, or to go deeper in the pose. In asana practice, compensations are unwanted movements that borrow either strength or movement from other body parts when the stability and/or mobility required are insufficient. When these altered recruitment patterns or compromised movements become the norm, they can, in the long run, cause joint problems and injury.

To identify and avoid the common compensations in Trikonasana, we first need to understand the intention and the pure movement of the pose. Trikonasana is a hip opening standing pose where the pure joint movements are external hip rotation and lateral tilt of the pelvis (front hip abduction, back hip adduction). It is therefore a pose that attempts to tilt the pelvis toward the front leg while maintaining a fairly static Tadasana (Mountain Pose) torso i.e. the main movement takes place in the hip joints, moving the pelvis in relation to the thighbones. A common



compensatory movement pattern in Trikonasana is a lateral flexion of the lumbar spine (side bend of the lower back), where the insufficient lateral pelvic tilt borrows movement from the spine, causing an unwanted movement in the spine and compromising the Tadasana torso (Image 1).

Lateral flexion of the spine is a correct movement in itself and correctly practiced for example in Parsvakonasana (Extended Side Angle Pose), but in the case of Trikonasana it needs to be addressed as it is caused by a faulty movement. A common cue to correct this compensation is to lengthen the lower side waist. This action of reaching through the spine or ribcage as an attempt to correct the compensation isn't effective, as it only tries to fix the symptom without dealing with the cause. The unwanted side bend of the spine that is easily observed, is merely a symptom or an effect of a root cause that is more challenging to observe. As always, the best way to find the root cause is to

ask why the chain of events happens:

- ▲ Why does the spine bend laterally? The lateral tilt of the pelvis is insufficient.
- ▲ Why is the lateral tilt of the pelvis insufficient? The movement is limited due to bone to bone contact in the front hip.
- ▲ Why is the movement of the front hip limited? The front thigh appears to be turned in.
- ▲ Why has the front thigh turned in? The attempt to square the hips (pull the back hip back) has rolled the front thigh in at the end range of its external rotation.

Hence the root cause that kicks off the domino effect is a faulty pelvic positioning i.e. overly square hips. If you're not sure whether your hips are too square for Trikonasana, you can notice the relationship between the front leg and the pelvis really clearly standing in Virabhadrasana II (Warrior II Pose) as a preparation for Trikonasana.



Image 2a



Image 3a



Image 2b



Image 2c

If the hips are square or too open, you will see your front knee collapsed inward (Image 2a) rather than stacking over the heel or ankle (Image 2b). While it makes sense in Trikonasana to open the hips as wide as available to minimise rotation in the lumbar spine, pulling the pelvis too far back can pull the front leg out of alignment, which will lock up the front hip and cause the bone to bone contact that prevents mobilisation of the hip joints. To correct the pose, move the back hip slightly forward to allow the front knee to move above the heel. However, even if we could fix a misalignment once in the final pose, it's always more beneficial not to let the compensation happen in the first place. As Vamana Rishi stated in the *Yoga Korunta*, "Oh Yogi, do not practice asana without

vinyasa." The transition into the pose is as important as the pose itself. When the transition into Trikonasana stays free of compensation, naturally the end result is a well aligned pose and no adjustment is needed.

Start your Trikonasana practice with a variation where you keep your feet parallel in a wide legged stance as shown. (image 3.) In my very first teacher training in Mysore, India, this variation was part of a warm up sequence called standing breathing movements. We would move dynamically from side to side synchronizing movement with the breath. The range of motion in this variation is rather limited due to bone to bone contact, as shown. (image 3b.) You can palpate this action by placing your hands on the outer hips to find the greater trochanter, a golf ball like bony protrusion of the thighbone. Tilt the pelvis from side to side and feel the greater trochanter limiting

the movement. This bone to bone contact is the root cause for the above mentioned common compensation in Trikonasana, lateral flexion of the spine. To eliminate the compensation, we need to externally rotate the front leg hip to roll the greater trochanter backward and out of the way. As individual ball and socket hip joints are structurally different, the external hip rotation varies greatly from person to person. Therefore there is no magical one size fits all shape for Trikonasana. As always the external shape of the pose needs to be based on the individual's biomechanics. To get a better idea of your individual degree of rotation and angle for the pelvis, you can use a simple hip assessment.

Lie supine on the mat in Supta Padangusthasana (Reclining Big Toe Pose). (image 4.) Feel free to use a strap or bend the knee. Use the feedback you receive from the floor to notice whether you are able to keep the pelvis still and only move from the hip joint. If you can keep your pelvis grounded, notice that your raised leg doesn't reach all the way to the floor. Note the angle between the pelvis and the thighbone; you will have a similar angle in Trikonasana between the pelvis and the front leg.

Keeping the angle in mind, prepare for the pose standing upright in a wide legged base with parallel feet



Image 4



Image 6a

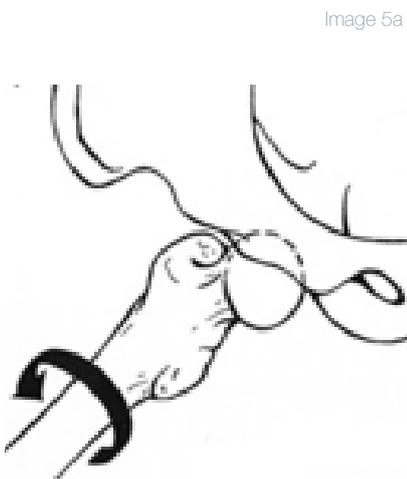


Image 5a



Image 5b



Image 6b

again. Place your hand on the greater trochanter to notice the effect of external rotation. Turn the back foot in just slightly and then, rotating the hip externally, turn the front foot into a 90 degree angle. Align the three main joints (ankle, knee and hip) of your front leg with the mat and recreate the same angle between the front leg and pelvis as you found in Supta Padangusthasana lying on the floor. Allow the back hip to slightly move forward. If you have found the bony projection, you will feel it rolling back and out of the way as you externally rotate to create a new empty space where the bone to bone contact used to be. The pelvis is then free to laterally tilt further into this new space, as illustrated in image 5a.

To improve spatial and body awareness, you can use a stick or a strap as shown

in image 5b over the midline of the body i.e. nose, sternum, navel, and the pubic bone. Tilt sideways very slowly to make sure that you keep the midline of the body in line with the stick or the tightly pulled strap. Stop the lateral tilt right before the spine starts bending sideways. If the lateral flexion of the spine has already happened, you can always start again and find your deepest hip position without the unwanted spinal compensation. This is the most common form of Trikonasana as taught today. It mobilises the hips further, increases the stretch to the abductors of the back leg and the hamstrings of the front leg, as well as creates more core strength as gravity has a greater pull on the trunk in this more horizontal position. As long as you move along these principles, it doesn't matter how high you stay in the pose.

Images 6a and 6b show examples of two correctly aligned, yet different looking Trikonasana poses. As always in yoga, less is more; as less gives you a cleaner movement pattern and therefore you'll gain more benefits i.e. hip opening in Trikonasana. Whereas doing more with compensation, would give less benefits of the hip opening.

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