

Ten points of advice on turning without getting dizzy

*By Nicole McLaren,
Guinness World Record Holder
in Whirling*

The Thrill of the Twirl

As in Love, dance blindly

Whirling without Vertigo

When Dizziness Dwindles

Make your Turns spectacular!

Let go of Control in order to gain it

Like the Calm in the Center of the Storm

Unaffected by the Power of the Centrifugal Force

Photo by Sabuas Lichtraum

Let me reveal a secret: I always got dizzy when spinning - until I found out why. Now I turn up to 4 hours. This article is about tricking the brain, about dualtasking and dervishes - and how to master one of the most fundamental yet endearing moves of our craft: the turn.

1. Why am I getting vertiginous?

While spinning, one often feels dizzy. Understanding the phenomenon means demystifying it - and thus coping with it much better. It is the sense of equilibrium in the inner ear that causes vertigo; a sensation of movement while being stationary.

The brain relies on three sensoric systems in order to understand dynamics and kinetics of the body: eyes, inner ear and muscles/joints/skin. Together they create a perfectly accurate image about positioning and spatial movement of the body. Usually these signals are in accordance with each other. But not always.

When we turn, the viscous fluid in the inner ear turns with us. When we stop it moves a little longer, because of inertia. The inner ear delivers the message of movement to the brain, while eyes and muscles/joints/skin report stillness. This mismatch of signals causes confusion that we experience as dizziness. Knowing this helps to overcome it.

2. Let go - and find joy in dizziness

The mental factor is significant. A dancer strives naturally for the utmost body control - but now it is all about letting go, and experiencing dizziness as a sensual sensation, even finding joy in it. Children hardly fear the frenzy: follow their lead and celebrate the temporary disorientation in space and time. If you allow it to bloom, it will fade away fast.

The nearly trance-like vision while whirling can irritate further. Here, the same principle applies: allow the world to glide past you in a blur. Relax. Breathe. Paradoxically you have to release control in order to gain it.

3. Warm up the inner ear - be wild!

The trick is to prepare your sense of balance for the new sensation with a “warm up” of the inner ear. Specific exercises heighten tolerance with respect to dizziness.

1. “Motorcyclist” - Run with tiny steps in straight lines,



then from time to time run a very tight curve and lean with the head and upper body as much as possible into it - as a motorcyclist would do in a sharp corner.

2. "Heavy-Metal Headbanging" - stylized, of course. Look gently upwards, then let the head hang relaxedly: all of this during a slightly jumpy Arabic basic step.
3. "3-Step-Turns" to the right and the left. Sometimes with looking upward, sometimes looking downward.
4. "Fluid Head Moves" - turns, tilts, shaking. Pendulums, figure eights, hair flips. Then all of the above with level changes, for example, during squats.

Be wild! The goal is to evoke a little bit of dizziness during the warm up. The fluid in the inner ear needs to be vigorously shaken - afterwards, the body experiences the turns as calm by comparison. We tricked the brain successfully anew!

4. Repetition

Turn long, turn often. That way, the brain reacts less and less to the sensory stimulations of whirling and eventually ignores them entirely. Our most complex organ adapts to new situations surprisingly fast and builds tolerance quickly. Take advantage of this phenomenon. The keyword is repetition: do not avoid spinning because you are getting dizzy - you are getting dizzy because you are not doing it often enough.

5. Dance blindfolded

As in love, walk blindly, dance blindly, whirl blindly. Try the exercises for the inner ear blindfolded. Holding balance without sight is incomparably more difficult. The brain, used to relying on the signals of the 3 major coordination systems (eye, inner ear and muscles/joints/skin), all of a sudden finds itself deprived of the visual input. *Ipsa facto*, the other two systems are reinforced - and that ameliorates balance during whirling, when vision is intensively blurred.

6. The dervish method: defocus

Bellydancers usually spot during turns. As a consequence of the rotational delay of the head the viscous fluid is less impacted by motion; we get less dizzy. Unfortunately that only works for the first few turns.

The defocus method helps to master turns more foundationally. Dervishes "look" inwardly; they do not spot. If you are safe in the knowledge that you are able to turn for multiple minutes, then several spins with spotting (as, for example, in a grand finale of a classical dance routine) become less daunting.



Photo by
Sabuas Lichtraum



Photo by André Elbing



Photo by Bernd Gems

7. Posture

The secret of spinning is posture – as every shift away from the center sends the inner ear into a frenzy. Keep the body aligned: lifted and grounded simultaneously. Pelvis up, engage abdominal muscles, shoulders down, neck long. Stretch skywards; grow an inch while whirling. Train posture constantly, through ballet, the martial arts, or Sunday strolls in the park – because without good posture, a turn sways, and it is not probable that you get dizzy, it guarantees outright nausea. Posture is sacrosanct.

8. Advanced balance - with “dualtasking”

Here is a dualtasking experiment that shows how brilliantly the brain corrects movement: Circle your head while reading this article. Easy, right? Now do the same with the magazine in your hands. It is incomparably harder, the words become illegible. We can use this phenomenon to our advantage: if we focus on balance consciously, we often over-compensate and lose firmness in our turn. We will be intuitively more stable when the body is busy with a second task. The result: a remarkably better balance. Ergo: train dualtasking. While whirling, open and close your belt, take off and put on a jacket, braid your hair – and your spinning skills will improve as if by magic.

9. Stretching

Posture and stretching are inextricably intertwined: they are two sides of the same coin. Hence: Stretch. Your whole body. Every day. Stretch as a morning routine, make it a rite, maybe with your morning coffee, when your body just arabesqued out of bed and is still warm and flexible. Soon you will notice an immense difference in posture, energetic flow and axial stability. Nothing prepares you for the impact of angular momentum thrust upon your body like deep daily stretching.



Photo by Ueli Zaugg

10. The perfect circle

Set goals, be ambitious. Strive for the spin that radiates quiescence. A sophisticated dancer masters whirls and twirls, spins and turns. Like planets being teased by moons, whirlers are bound by a perpetual quest for ever more harmonious radial symmetry. Internally and externally, that quest is mesmerizing. Thus: Refine your craft! Make your turns spectacularly beautiful. The grandezza of an immaculate turn is timelessly sublime. Dervishes turn seamlessly, along an invisible axis they perform the perfect circle.

Whatever your genre, whirling on stage shows meditative composure, grounded in deep technical expertise. When one spins exactly on-axis, it is almost relaxing. Watching a dancer seemingly unaffected by the power of the centrifugal force fascinates. Similar to the eye of the storm, there is a sense of grand calm being in the middle of the perfect turn – as if the dancer stood still, and it was the world that revolves around her.

NICOLE MCLAREN



International dance artist Nicole McLaren, born in Switzerland and now living in the US, trained for decades in various Middle Eastern dances – first and foremost her speciality, whirling. Alongside whirling, Nicole pursues axial balance through ballet and karate, the latter in which she earned a black belt and won several medals at European and World Championships. A master-level graduate of the University of Zurich, Nicole is an avid linguist and writer, whose articles have appeared in American, Australian and German dance magazines. She is the founder and artistic director of her own whirling troupe, the Whirling Wizards. Nicole’s feminine choreographic vision combines the centuries-old Turkish turning technique with an experimental approach in order to create a new, contemporary stage art form.

Nicole has performed and taught whirling in 15 countries, from Egypt and South Africa to Mexico and all over Europe. She won the German Halima Dance Award for her “outstanding contributions to Whirling Dance” and has been featured on American TV as a whirling instructor in the Oprah-produced “Dr. Oz Show”. Nicole is able to whirl for 4 hours continuously and holds the Guinness World Record for “Most Sufi Rotations in One Hour”: she spun 3497 times in 60 minutes – and continues to train. www.nicolemclaren.com Photo by Sabuas Lichtraum