

yoga

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Sthira Sukham Asanam (Seated posture should be steady and comfortable.)

Patanjali's basic advice in the Yoga Sutra may sound simple, but many find sitting in meditation painful and difficult. This sequence of poses can help bring ease to your seated posture.

By Linda Sparrowe

You might think, after a 30-year meditation practice, that cross-legged sitting would be second nature for me. But like many meditators I've experienced plenty of uncomfortable sessions—times when my chest would collapse and my head lurch forward, as alert calmness succumbed to deep slumber and numbness in my legs obliterated any sense of energy flowing from the base of my spine to the crown of my head. Friends who hear my complaints occasionally ask why I bother to meditate at all, and I must confess that I've sometimes wondered about this myself. But over the years my meditation posture has actually improved quite a bit. I no longer have to sit against the wall, as I did when I was 18; my back muscles have gotten stronger; and my ability to stay with my breathing—on a good day—has increased substantially.



I credit my yoga asana practice with making my seated meditation a lot easier. If you also struggle to find comfort in your meditation practice, incorporating a few basic poses, such as the ones shown here, may make a world of difference in the quality of your experience.

Early yoga texts provide almost no advice on how to avoid the aches and pains of prolonged sitting that plague us modern practitioners. Chances are that is because people did not have problems sitting cross-legged two thousand years ago—as after all, chair sitting had not yet weakened their backs or tightened their hamstrings and groins. In the Bhagavad Gita, from perhaps 500 bce, practitioners were simply admonished to sit up straight, keep their neck and head erect, and not to move. Hundreds of years later, in his Yoga Sutra, Patanjali eschewed detailed instructions about meditative posture in favor of some basic, straightforward advice: Simply to maintain steadiness and ease (*sthira* and *sukha*) when sitting. In Patanjali's Classical Yoga, to perfect asana—literally, "seat"—meant to find stillness, to quiet the body enough to turn attention toward the mind and the senses. As Richard Rosen, yoga teacher and author of *The Yoga of Breath: A Step-by-Step Guide to Pranayama* (Shambhala, 2002), explains it: "When you're able to sit comfortably, you feel as if you coincide with the infinite (*samapatti*). Your physical limitations . . . dissolve, and you feel as if you are expanding to fill the surrounding space. Finally, you transcend the so-called pairs of

opposites and are no longer distracted by a physical and emotional tug-of-war."

By a few centuries after Patanjali, hatha yoga texts had a lot more to say about seated postures. These texts also expanded the meaning of "asana" to include other poses that strengthened and opened the body. The Goraksha Paddhati, a twelfth-century text, boasts 84 postures; the Hatha Yoga Pradipika, written around the middle of the fourteenth century, offers 16, mostly variations on Padmasana (Lotus Pose) or Siddhasana (Adept's Pose); and the Gheranda Samhita of the late seventeenth century weighs in with 32. One text, the Yoga-Shastra, even mentions 840,000 different poses but only describes Padmasana as suitable for attaining enlightenment.

The Perfect Seat

Traditionally, padmasana has been considered the meditative posture *par excellence*. But why all this reverence for the Lotus? According to yoga master B.K.S. Iyengar, Padmasana is the only pose in which all four areas of the body are perfectly balanced: the feet, legs, and pelvis; the torso; the arms and hands; and the neck, throat, and head. When the body achieves perfect balance, Iyengar says, the brain can rest correctly on the spinal column and breathing comes easily. In other words, once the legs are settled in Lotus, the torso can soar upward without any effort and the diaphragm is able to expand more fully.

But getting down on the floor to sit doesn't mean forcing yourself into Padmasana if your body doesn't belong there. Even seasoned asana practitioners who can get into Lotus without a problem may not find it comfortable for long sits. Luckily other seated meditation poses exist and can provide many of the same benefits. If you can't do full Lotus, try Ardha Padmasana (Half Lotus Pose). Siddhasana (Adept's Pose) is another sitting pose that comes with sterling historical credentials: The Gheranda Samhita lists Siddhasana as a legitimate meditation posture, and the Hatha Yoga Pradipika even promises that it will lead the practitioner to *Samadhi* if practiced consistently for 12 years. For very many practitioners, Siddhasana puts less strain than Padmasana on the ankles, knees, and hips. Sukhasana (Easy Pose)—sitting upright with legs crossed at the shins and your feet under your knees or thighs—also allows many people to sit upright without experiencing strain in the leg joints. For would-be meditators who cannot conceive of ever sitting in any cross-legged position for more than a just a few labored breaths, Virasana (Hero Pose) also gives a firm foundation; in this pose, you kneel and then sit back onto the floor or a yoga block placed between your feet.

These poses all work well for meditation because they share certain essential qualities. Physically, a good meditation pose should be one you can hold for an extended period, quietly, without fidgeting or fussing. It should provide a solid foundation, a base on which you feel secure and stable. You should experience a balance between release and effort, surrender and exertion, and grounding and lifting. Energetically, you should feel firmly connected to the earth and yet light as a feather. Finally, a good seated pose should bring a sense of clarity and alertness.

Western Challenges

Unfortunately many Westerner practitioners suffer more discomfort than lightness in meditation poses: pain and instability in the knees, tightness and aching in the hips and sacrum, as well as fatigue and cramping in the back muscles. Ironically the Western culture's attempt to find comfort and stability in sitting by creating ever-cushier chairs and sofas has backfired. Our reliance on such props has weakened our back muscles, kept our hamstrings in a constant state of gripping, forced our heads to jut forward, pushed our sacra backward, and rounded our upper backs.

Most experts tend to agree with Julie Gudmestad, *Yoga Journal's* anatomy columnist and a physical therapist, who says the hips play a key role in proper sitting. "In order to sit comfortably, you need a lot of external rotation in your hips," she says; lack of external rotation prevents your knees from releasing down toward the floor. If rotation in your hip joints is limited, says Gudmestad, then your body will accommodate your attempt to rotate by moving at the next available joint. Unfortunately that joint is the knee, which is much less stable than the hip. The knee's main job is to flex and extend; it has no business twisting. When you externally rotate the leg at the knee instead of the hip joint, knee pain often results. And as any yoga teacher will tell you, knee pain is never a good thing: If your knee hurts in any cross-legged position, choose another way to sit.

According to Gudmestad, tightness in the hip will not only threaten the knee but can also "end up torquing the pelvis, causing it to rotate posteriorly." So in other words, you round your back. Put simply: If your thigh can't rotate, your shin or lower back probably will. And a rounded lower back pushes everything else out of alignment: The whole spine slumps, the head falls forward, and then the diaphragm compresses, all of which impedes the blood flow to the core of the body and restricts breathing. No wonder anyone sitting this way feels uncomfortable!

Of course, lack of external rotation isn't the only problem in cross-legged sitting. According to Anusara Yoga founder John Friend, another reason for such slumped posture is weakness in the paraspinals, the muscles running up along the spine. Tight hamstrings in the back of the legs and tight gluteal muscles in the buttocks can also contribute to slumping by making it difficult to tip the pelvis back toward alignment.

And while external rotation is crucial, some practitioners have plenty of external rotation and still cannot successfully execute a comfortable Padmasana or even Siddhasana. In fact, too much external rotation can also be a problem: Ballet dancers often complain of sore hips when they sit, not because their femurs can't externally rotate but because many of the muscles surrounding their outer hips—including the gluteus medius muscles in the buttocks and the iliotibial (IT) band on the outer hip and thigh are so tight from years of turnout. As Friend points out, the femur head (the top of the thighbone) needs to be able to do more than just externally rotate; it must move in toward the midline, toward the inner part of the hip joint. In addition, the femur head must glide back within the socket. To help with these movements, Friend suggests that some students can actually benefit from manually rotating their upper thighs *inward* first, so they ground the sitting bones and release the sacrum forward before trying to go into

external rotation.

What's a Yogi to Do?

Luckily for modern-day practitioners, yoga asana practice has burgeoned and become much more sophisticated over the past 2000 years. Myriad poses now exist to help set those femur heads properly in their sockets, elongate and strengthen the back muscles, soften those groins, as well as open up pathways for energy (prana) to flow unimpeded from the base of the spine up through the crown of the head. How to begin? California yoga teacher Patricia Sullivan created the practice sequence outlined in this article to specifically address sitting challenges. Since a restricted range of motion in the hip sockets plagues most people, she's included poses that work the legs in internal rotation, like Uttanasana (Standing Forward Bend), as well as some to externally rotate the thighbones, such as Supta Padangusthasana II (Reclining Big-Toe Pose) with the leg out to the side. Back-strengthening poses, like Adho Mukha Svanasana (Downward-Facing Dog Pose) also encourage the pelvis to tilt properly as the thighbones move within the sockets. Several poses help relax and lengthen tight inner thighs and groins: Baddha Konasana (Bound Angle Pose), Supta Ardha Padmasana (Reclining Half-Lotus Pose), and Upavistha Konasana (Wide-Legged Forward Bend); all provide a good stretch while encouraging external rotation of the femurs.

In the end, what many practitioners find most helpful is simply doing a well-rounded practice consistently. Take the body through its full range of motion-forward bends to lengthen the hamstrings and release the sacrum, backbends and standing poses to strengthen the back and open up the chest and abdominal region, seated poses to open the hips and encourage proper femur rotation, and supine poses to stretch the hamstrings and groins. Not all the preparatory poses need to be active ones; passive poses allow you to open the body without tiring and to draw awareness in toward the Self.

Senior Iyengar teacher Patricia Walden reminds us all to be patient. Most beginning students will find their bodies speaking to them rather loudly when they first sit down to meditate. Richard Rosen suggests that you sit for only a few minutes at a stretch, gradually increasing the time as the posture gets easier. Use props to make your sitting time more comfortable. Sit on folded blankets, a zafu (meditation cushion), or a bolster, so you can keep your knees lower than your hips. You do want to help our knees descend toward the floor, but do not overwork the forward tilt of your pelvis to accomplish this; instead, draw your spine up so your weight comes toward the front edge of your sitting bones. At this same time, allow your tailbone to actively extend toward the floor. As you do this, be careful not to center your weight too far back on your sitting bones; if you do, you will overround your lower back.

If your back spinal muscles insist on sagging, sit against a wall for support. Walden says the wall can give you valuable information. Is one hip closer to the wall than the other? Does one shoulder press into the wall while the other moves away? Use the wall as your guide to gently correct your posture.

If no sitting pose works for you at first, begin with what your body is used to—sit in a chair. But sit mindfully. Richard Rosen suggests sitting so that the top rim of your pelvis (those bony protrusions at the top of your hips) stays parallel to the chair seat and the pubis and tailbone are equidistant from the chair seat. To keep those muscles around the spine active, lift the front body from the perineum (the floor of the pelvis) up through the crown of the head. Rosen says that the front of the spine should feel slightly longer than the back. This length in your spine should help free up the diaphragm, making breathing easier for you. If you have trouble keeping your spine lifted, Walden recommends you sit with your legs through the back of the chair and use your arms on the top of the chairback for support to help you elongate your spine.

Even if you cannot do Padmasana no matter how many different variations of stretching and strengthening poses you practice, you can certainly move toward realizing the benefits of Lotus without falling prey to its difficulties. No matter what sitting pose you choose to use, work toward simultaneously rooting down and lifting up, so that you are aiming to build a sense of groundedness and freedom.

And as your meditative postures begin to grow stronger and more comfortable, let yourself enjoy those occasional moments when sitting becomes effortless, the subtle channels of your body open, and prana flows with total freedom.

Contributing Editor Linda Sparrowe has recently written two books: *A Woman's Book of Yoga and Health: A Lifelong Guide to Wellness* (Shambhala Publications, 2002) and *Yoga: A Yoga Journal Book* (Hugh Lauter Levin & Associates, 2002), which contains more than 375 of David Martinez's stunning asana photos and an overview of yoga history.

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