

Do Just Sit There

No need to inflict bodily harm to achieve a quiet mind. **By Anne Cushman**



During my dozen years or so of teaching yoga on meditation retreats, I've watched countless yogis use their meditation cushion as the kind of self-torture device that would violate the Geneva Conventions if you tried to inflict it on someone else. I've seen hard-core yoga practitioners wrenching their legs into full or half lotus for marathon sittings, apparently believing that bruising your inner thigh with your ankle is crucial to spiritual awakening. I've seen seasoned meditators slumping doggedly from one bell to the next in lofty disregard for basic body mechanics, while wondering why they're spending yet another retreat focused primarily on the excruciating pain between their shoulder blades.

To save you from similar agonies in your meditation practice, I've gathered a few of the tips I offer in "posture clinics" early in a retreat. While it may be possible to meditate anywhere and anytime, it helps to have a formal method to cultivate gentle, spacious attention. And creating a supportive outer and inner environment in which to practice that method—one that grounds and relaxes the nervous system—sends signals to the primal brain that say, "It's safe. You can let down your guard."

This is why so few ashrams are situated on a freeway meridian between a fire station and a discotheque. What you want is a meditation posture that's the

equivalent of a creek-side temple in a quiet meadow, inviting you to settle in and relax awhile. And as you rest in that temple, the shy forest animals of your inner being—deer and raccoons, mountain lions and rattlesnakes—will reveal themselves as they emerge to drink.

Seated Pose

To cultivate this silent inner witnessing, you need an asana that's *sthira* and *sukha*, in the words of Patanjali's *Yoga Sutra*—a posture that's stable and comfortable, one you can maintain for a significant amount of time without a lot of fidgeting, tension, or thinking about what to do next. You probably don't want to hang out in headstand, downward dog, or a full backbend for 30 to 40 minutes at a stretch. And while lying down in *shavasana* is definitely stable and comfortable, chances are you'll fall asleep if you do it for too long, especially if you've just eaten lunch.

That's why a seated posture works so well—it's simple enough so you don't have to keep fussing over it. It's solid. It's restful. And if you doze off, eventually you'll start to fall forward and wake yourself up.

If *padmasana*, the cross-legged lotus pose yogis are classically depicted in, doesn't work for your tight hips and lower back, don't give up hope—for most people it's not appropriate for long holds. Fortunately, there's nothing magical about it unless it gives you the stability and ease you need to sit comfortably.

What is important, if you're going to do formal meditation practice for any length of time, is the alignment of your head, neck, spine, and pelvis. A balanced spine supports the relaxation and sensitivity of your whole nervous system.

Imbalances and misalignments of these major structures create tension and pain, sending alarm signals to your brain that in turn generate further anxiety. It's hard to soften and be present if your whole body is screaming

Emergency! Of course you can open to pain through meditation and learn to be with it kindly as it arises and passes away. But why create unnecessary suffering?

When the skull, rib cage, and pelvis are properly aligned, the cerebral-spinal fluid can circulate freely, bathing and nourishing the brain and spinal cord as the craniosacral rhythms pulse unimpeded. In the language of the yogis, the *prana*—the life force—can flow with ease through the *sushumna nadi*, the central river of energy coursing through your core.

So find a way to sit where your spine can rest easily in its natural curves, with the skull balanced over the shoulder girdle, and the shoulder girdle balanced over the pelvis. To maintain the natural curve of the lumbar spine, sit up on the front of your sitting bones, not slumping back or arching forward.

If you choose to sit cross-legged on

Chair Pose

If none of these floor-seated positions is comfortable, try a chair. Don't lean against the back of the chair, though. Sit on the forward edge, with the soles of your feet flat on the ground and your spine upright. Most chair seats slope slightly downward from front to back—exactly opposite of the movement you want in the pelvis. So fold a yoga mat or a blanket under your pelvis to keep the knees lower than the hip bones.

Now—whether you're on a cushion or a chair—gently round and arch the lower back a few times, tilting the pelvis forward and back, until you're centered on your sitting bones. Sway front to back, and then side to side, until you feel the skull balanced lightly over the pelvis. Your head weighs about 12 pounds, so if it migrates forward even slightly, over time its tug will contribute to the stab-

YOU WANT A MEDITATION POSTURE THAT'S THE EQUIVALENT OF A CREEK-SIDE TEMPLE IN A QUIET MEADOW, INVITING YOU TO SETTLE IN AND RELAX AWHILE.

a cushion, sit up high enough so your knees are lower than your hip bones. This creates spaciousness in the front of the groin and makes it easier for the pelvis to tilt into proper alignment. Rather than full or half lotus, which for most people torques the knee joint, I generally recommend *sukhasana* (easy seated pose) with one shin folded in front of the other—just remember to alternate with every sitting which leg is in front or on top. Your knees should be solidly grounded; if they still bob in space no matter how high you pile up the seat cushions, put something underneath them for support, like a folded blanket. Or, even better, kneel to sit with your cushion between your calves in the Japanese *seiza* position, which is basically a supported *virasana*.

bing pain between the shoulder blades that longtime meditators know so well.

I know when I get swept away by a tsunami of thoughts I often find that my head has involuntarily craned forward, as if I were chasing the thoughts with my nose, like a dog trailing a rabbit through the underbrush. If that happens to you, check your posture each time you return to the present moment. Slightly lower the chin and lift the back of the skull to create space at the base of the occiput, where the head meets the neck. This gesture slightly lowers your forebrain, helping to cool the mind.

Rest your hands lightly on your thighs or knees. If you face the palms down, you'll feel more grounded; if you turn them up, you'll feel more energized. >>

Experiment and see what works best for you on any given day. If your neck or shoulders feel strained, try resting the hands on a cushion placed in your lap.

Now imagine a river of energy pouring down from the sky and through the crown of your head, through the center of your skull, through the center of your heart space, out the floor of your pelvis, and down into the earth. At the same time, it flows in the opposite direction, up from the center of the earth and out the crown of the head. Let your body make whatever micro-movements

DON'T HAIRSPRAY
YOUR SITTING
POSE INTO STILLNESS—
LET IT RIPPLE IN
THE WIND OF
YOUR BREATH.

it needs to align itself naturally around this river, coming into its own unique, ever-shifting balance. Soften the gates of your senses—the muscles around your eyes, your inner ears, the root of your tongue. Close your eyes gently, or let your relaxed gaze rest on a point on the floor in front of you.

Don't hairspray your sitting pose into stillness—let it ripple in the wind of your breath. Your heart is beating, your lungs are breathing. Your stomach is disassembling your breakfast oatmeal, turning it into components for bones and skin and blood. Your brain is pumping out opinions and plans. Rest in the stillness that holds all this movement. There's nowhere you have to go and nothing you have to do. This is it. ■

Anne Cushman is the co-director of the Mindfulness Yoga Training Program at Spirit Rock Meditation Center. Her novel Enlightenment for Idiots was named by Booklist as one of the top 10 first novels of its year.