

## Monday only: Posture instructions

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So, as I mentioned before, one of the reasons I like to do posture instructions is so that people don't have unnecessary discomfort when they sit. But I also like to do it because posture is a phenomenal subject for mindfulness. There's a lot to be learned from posture. There's a lot of benefit and support that we can get from a meditation posture. And in some circles, yoga circles, for example, sitting in a cross-legged position is called a yogic posture, *āsana*. And so there's certain kind of benefits that come from being very careful and aligned with your posture that supports being present, supports concentration, supports mindfulness, supports the arising of faith, supports having energy to practice, supports wisdom, the five faculties.

And there's a lot of self-learning that come from attending to a posture. Our posture will express a lot. And we say in English that someone is posturing, and it implies that they're communicating something which is usually not so nice. But our posture shows that if we're depressed or sad, or if we're angry or frustrated, or if we're happy to see someone, that's sometimes expressed in the posture. A posture is an expression. And so to take a posture that for you expresses being present.

Like this really is what you want to do is to be here and be present. And for each person that's going to be different. And so to adjust the different parts of your body. So you feel like, oh this is really now I'm going to be grounded here, present here with this. And so with that as a kind of introduction, I'll talk about posture for sitting cross-legged on the floor and sitting in a chair. And there are other postures.

Some people lay down for this posture and some people do their meditation standing, standing meditation. So there's all kinds of different ways of doing it. And for those of you who are sitting in a chair, sometimes there's some idea that the real meditation posture is sitting cross-legged, you know, the Buddha sitting this way, and that's the model. The mythology

of Buddhism is that the next Buddha will be a chair sitter. So maybe it's one of you. So to sit on the... you know, cross-legged, so-called cross-legged, just a way of saying it in English.

I actually recommend you don't cross your legs because it puts a lot of twisting on the knees to do that. And if you're young or if you're done for a long time, if you have very open hips, you can maybe sit in half lotus or full lotus. And there's some yogic benefits to that. But this is the most gentle for the body to sit. So sometimes it's called tailor fashion. One leg is in front of the other.

Sometimes we call it, in Buddhism, we call it Burmese fashion, because somehow maybe Burmese meditators would sit this way. And then also it's good to be elevated. And how elevated, how high you should sit, it depends on how open your hips are. And in general, if you do yoga and hip opening stretches to really open the joint there, it will make it easier to sit cross-legged. But you want to adjust the height. And if you're too low, it can cause a variety of challenges.

And if you're too high, it causes other challenges. And so for different people, different heights. And for some people who get into it for the long term, the height that you'll sit on will change over time. And so you want to be prepared to adjust it and change. But the principle is that you want to sit high enough so that you can drop your knees to be a little bit lower than your hips, or lower than your hips, and high enough so that it accentuates the little bit of a natural curve in the lower part of the back. Many people have a natural curve there.

And you want to certainly maintain the natural curve. The spine is, for most people, the spine is constructed that a straight spine is not really straight. That it's the way the architecture of the spine is, there's a gentle S curve in it, where the vertebrae kind of support each other nicely. So you want to kind of have that. So to have a teeny bit of curve in the lower back, so there's a little bit of feeling of strength there. And there's a wonderful way sometimes you can feel, it's just the right kind of positioning of the lowest vertebrae and the tailbone on your cushion.

And little bit of curve, there's an uplift movement that happens to the rest of the torso. You can actually feel like you're being lifted up a little bit from having just the right kind of curvature and balance and sit there. That can feel nice. If you're over-arched, which some people are, that's going to cause long-term problems. And if you're not arched enough, or if you're flat, or if you're kind of caving out, pushing out this way, that puts a tremendous amount of tension on the vertebrae over time. And so it's probably not such a good idea to do this if you're going to end this meditation for a long term.

And so find a good posture. And for some people who are new to a good meditation posture, it takes a while for the body to adjust to it. And if you just do it every day practicing, ever so imperceptibly your body will begin finding its way into moving into this yogic posture. I've watched people like over a year of daily sitting, that they first sat down to meditate, their knees were up and like this, and they were like awkward and fidgety. Then over slowly, slowly over a year, you watch them settle and after a while, their whole body shifts and change, and they have a yogic body. They can sit very nicely.

But it takes a while. But the body will find its way if you just keep doing it and kind of begin with the best posture you can. So to sit a little bit elevated, and if you need more elevation than the round cushions provide you, you can get some of these square and build height. And then for sitting, the usual thing is to do is to sit on these round cushions. And this is the buckwheat ones, which is actually kind of nice for some people because they kind of contour, contour to your body. And so it takes the weight of the torso more evenly dispersed, and you can adjust it a little bit nicely to get just the right pressure in the right place in your bottom position.

The other one is made out of kapok, which is kind of a cotton-like substance that is also very nice to sit on, though that starts to get very hard. And so if you sit on it long enough, it starts feeling like cement. And it's really hard to sew. There's also half moon cushions, and those are kind of nice because it spreads the weight more widely on your bottom. And I sat for many years on a half moon cushion because I needed more protection for my sitting bones and tail bones and sciatica and things like that. And then if you're sitting on the floor, you don't have to sit cross-legged.

There are other ways of doing it. You can use a bench, in which case you are putting your legs your lower legs under the bench, or you can get the same effect by taking one of these kinds of cushions, putting it upright this way, and putting it between your ankles, and then sitting down. And some people find it's much better to sit this way. If you're not used to sitting cross-legged this way for a whole retreat, you might want to vary how you sit, so you don't build up a strain in any one posture. So you might want to do one or two sittings like this if you're sitting cross-legged. Or you might want to sit in a chair and go back and forth a little bit just so you don't build up the strain.

So this works very well. Some people find that it flattens out their legs, or there's a lot of weight on their knees to do this. And so sometimes what's nice is for your knees, sometimes if you put your knees over the edge of the mat here, so the weight of your body goes in your shin rather than your knees, some people find that works better. And for the ankles, sometimes

people find it's better to go back and have the feet, either toes or the ankles kind of go over the edge of the back. And some people, for a while, I needed both. And so I folded these in half.

And then my knees were, then there was space for my knees to go over the front and then my ankles to go over the back. And also there was more height, so that it was even more of a nice bend on my ankle. And if you're sitting, you know, this so-called cross-legged posture, there's all kinds of very small adjustments you can make with your legs, that can make a big difference. First, when you sit down, is, this is the way I used to do it when I was a young Zen student. I would sit down, I'd grab my ankle, and I would yank my foot up and sit down. And that put a lot of tension on my knee.

The place where you want the action to be is not in the knee, but in the hips. That's what you want the twisting to happen. So one thing I learned to do for I usually, you can do it for both legs, but I'll just do one. I would go like this first and kind of try to lift myself out of the knee socket, the hip socket. Kind of just lift, make it open up there. And then when I was gonna lay down the leg, I would lift it up kind of as high as I could, kind of stretching as I did, and then rock it back and forth, kind of opening up that joint a little bit.

And then I would lean in the direction of the knee, like that. And then I would straighten up, and then the action is in the hips. Makes sense? And so you can do it a little bit both too. I mean, you go like this. Just kind of lift up out of it. Kind of rock back and forth, best you can. And then lean into it and put it down. The other one, sometimes I found it useful to take my hands over my kneecap and pull my kneecap up a little bit. Just a teeny bit.

Or sometimes I would pull my skin up so that it wouldn't stretch and pull so much. And just a little bit, sometimes the tendons or something would be a little bit better that way. Sometimes if there's a problem with the ankles, putting like a hand towel or something underneath the ankle, so you have more of a normal angle, can make a world of difference sometimes. Sometimes, like I'm sitting now, to have the toes over the edge of the mat, can make the slightest little difference in the twisting that goes all the way up to the knee, and make it a little bit better for the knee. You won't believe it at first, but if you're sitting all day this way, after a while the strain, you know, the slightest all thing can make a difference. Having your knees further apart, can one option, having them closer together, having the kind of the heel underneath you almost, some people find better, or having the legs far away from your body, so you can.

So there's all kinds of little variations that can make a difference for where the strains are. So then if you're sitting in a chair, the instructions on a chair is to sit in such a way that your

knees are lower than your hips. And that's how you get a little bit the same effect on your lower spine. If your knees are higher, you tend to push out the lower back. And the classic instructions is certainly not to cross your legs in a chair, but to have both soles of the feet on the squarely, kind of firmly on the surface. And so your toes are not up or anything.

And the classic instructions have the legs more or less parallel to each other. And though I know some people like to have their legs out to the side, they feel like they have a wider, stronger support that way. And then so depending on you know, the height of the chair or your height, you might want to, like I'm doing now, I'm sitting on extra support to be higher. And we have these nice... They're called wedges. And I sit on them all the time. I find a really nice way of kind of getting the right angle for sitting. But for the chair, this also can be done by sitting down and it creates a nice angle that maybe some people better than what the chair provides.

The chair, they go back towards the back of the seat rest and that's not so good. If you're sitting in a chair because it's mostly an issue of your legs, then the recommendation is try to sit without using the backrest. There are some yogic benefits of holding your torso up on your own. Be self-supporting. The kind of inner presence and requirement that keeps you upright, is actually quite supportive overall. If you need to use a backrest and your legs are short or something, you can take one of these and put them behind you. Or take one of the other cushions, you know, the square ones and put it behind you.

There's also these, here, we have these foam, solid, very, can you hold up your foam like that? And so if that way you can sit in a chair and if you want to have your feet firmly on something, you can have those, use those foams to put your feet on. And some people build up height that way. If you want to use a backrest, the backrest then... If it's possible to mostly use the bottom of the backrest, then you get a little bit of the yogic benefits of holding yourself upright. And one of the interesting ways of doing it is to lean forward, and that pulls the lower part of the back here, and you lean forward, and it pulls it away from the chair. And then you scoot yourself back as firmly as you can into the backrest. And then you snake up, coming your head first. And then you'll feel there's kind of a good pressure against there. And that pressure you might find helps raise the torso.

So you can support you to go upright and be upright. If you want to use the whole backrest, that's fine. Okay. There is a wonderful thing that sometimes can be done is you get a towel or one of those blankets or a coil or something and wrap it in to make a coil. And then you would, I don't think this is a good example, but if I curl it up like this and then put it down, it doesn't work for someone who's kind of tall, so with a backrest, but maybe the wall or something,

and put it down upright between your... against your spine like this, that kind of opens up the chest when you're sitting and keeps you a little bit from collapsing backwards in the chair. Because these chairs, they lean, the back leans backward. And if you kind of lean back with it too much, it's a little bit put you to sleep. A little bit too much, you start relaxing too much. So to have something that pushes you out and keeps you upright. And also that allows your shoulder blades to kind of roll back around that coil, that tube or something is kind of nice.

So the hands, you can do anything that's comfortable with for you. There's a big tradition of people just to have their hands face down on their knees or on their thighs. Some people really like to have them together like this, or just dangling. And if you... Sometimes if you have your hands too far forward on your knee, or if you have it resting down on your ankle, it actually can sometimes can pull your shoulders and your spine forward. And some people find it very nice to get some kind of support and put it on top of their legs and have their hands held this way. Or bring their hands away from the knee back towards, so the elbows are right along the midpoint of the side of the rib cage here.

And they can be quite high. Some people like really high. Some people collapse a lot, so having a high support like this sometimes helps them to stay upright. And sometimes some people have scoliosis or have shoulder injuries or something. And there's all kinds of creative ways of sitting then. One is to get something to have your hands like this. Like if you have a curvature of your back, this can compensate for it a little bit so that it doesn't put too much strain. Or if you have some kind of shoulder injury, this can take the pressure off the shoulder from it hanging too much. So there's all kinds of little variations you can do, and that can be nice.

And so a couple of tricks of the trade that help you have a nice kind of upright posture is if you put your hands on either side of your hips and lift yourself almost off the chair, almost off the cushion, usually then the chest comes up forward a little bit, and then kind of hang there for a moment. And then as you release your hands, let the shoulders roll back. And if you do that, you probably feel a bit more open, a little bit more the spine, a little more alert. Another is that there's a lot of people who now curve their shoulders a lot from being on screens a lot and all kinds of reasons. And so there can be a lot of tension here that begins to unravel and hurt when we sit down to meditate. It's surprising how much pain we can have from the tension that we've been chronically held in the shoulders.

One thing you can do that can help sometimes is to, as I call it, the windmill. You bring your one shoulder up to your ear. So you keep it up, the shoulder up, and then you reach it forward, stretching it forward, and then you lift it straight up. Keep lifting it out of the shoulder socket,

lifting it up, and then you have to do it all the way around. And as you bring it back down, have the hand go towards the ceiling. And you might, if you feel that, feel a little more open in that shoulder. The other one, but yet the shoulder has to go up first, and then stretch forward, then all the way around. And then laying ahead of your palm up to the ceiling when you lay down, when it comes and rests. And then if you want, you can, of course, turn it back. But that sometimes helps certain kinds of tension, certain kinds of curvatures or problems in the shoulder to do that.

And you're welcome to do that sometimes here. Final thing to say is that our heads are kind of heavy. And if I went around all day with this bowl like this. My arm would get really tired. But if I hold the bowl like this, close into the center of gravity, I can hold it for much longer. So if your head is really well aligned in the center of gravity of your body, less muscles have to be used to hold it in place. But if you're sitting like this, boy, the muscles back here have to work a lot to hold you. So you want to kind of make sure that, the ideal is that your ears are kind of lined up with your shoulders. And one way to do that is to tuck down your chin a little bit and pull back. And that sometimes can maybe make it a little bit easier for the head.

And you might sometimes, if you keep your eyes closed in meditation, periodically open them and see where your eyes are looking. If they're looking at your ankle... And then you're probably, you know, not positioning the head very well for the long term. Or if it looks like you're, you know, looking up at the ceiling, that also is probably not so good. Or if you're looking up the window to the left, you know, you know, you want to see if you want to try to be lined up kind of a center with the head. We generally sit with the eyes closed in our tradition. And for that, the posture of the eyes is to have the eyes resting in the sockets. Right? I find that little bit more restful to imagine when I first sit down that I'm looking backwards and down. Somehow that helps my eyes kind of overcome the constant looking out and trying to figure out what's going on. But you're welcome to keep the eyes open if that's more restful for you.

And the way I was taught to do it was to have the eyes half open looking down, you know, 45 degrees down, not focusing on anything. So those are some of the points, the posture that for now, and there's other things, little details that if you have postural questions and practice discussions, we can talk about something. I want to make a couple of more points. One is that some people, and they hear all this posture instructions, assume that if there's a right posture out there, if you just find it, you'll never hurt in meditation ever again. And so they're constantly fidgeting, trying to look for that perfect posture. There is no such posture.

Every posture sooner or later will feel uncomfortable for a while. Maybe very uncomfortable

for a while. And so if you're constantly fidgeting and trying to adjust, then you're actually interfering with the whole process of settling in and quieting and concentrating. This keeps you kind of the part of your mind that's figuring things out, always active. And so you have to decide how much discomfort you're willing to live with in meditation. And that's your choice. There's, you don't have to sit with any discomfort. There's no requirement here. You're welcome to adjust your posture during a meditation session. You can change it.

You can also, if we're so sitting on the floor, this is the rest posture. Just go like this and rest everything if you want. But the art of it is probably don't change your posture at the first discomfort, signs of discomfort, the first pain. There's something about learning to work with pain, working with discomfort, which is a very important part of this whole process. And I'd like to summarize it this way, that if you're only free, liberated, when you're comfortable, you're not really free. So how do you find freedom, even with pain, too? Yeah. And there's a wonderful laboratory in meditation, because it's optional to sit with pain sometimes, maybe you can kind of explore it to learn your relationship with pain, your reactivity to pain, your beliefs around pain, just kind of find your ease with the pain. Here you can, because sometime in life, it's not going to be optional. Something might happen that it... moments notice that suddenly you're in excruciating pain, far from doctors and medicine, anything.

And so then you know how to work with it. You know yourself. You know how that works and how to stay calm and stay wise, because you've learned in this laboratory here to understand yourself well. But if you never sit with pain, if you start getting discouraged, if you say that's enough, that's fine. And then maybe another day you maybe push the edge a little bit more if you feel encouraged or inspired to explore it and find your equanimity. But you don't have to. That's the important lesson here. But there are some exceptions. One is that, so if you have pain while you're meditating, sitting in meditation posture, and sometimes the pain goes away as soon as they ring the bell, sometimes the pain is gone by time you get to the bottom of the steps. So that's probably fine.

But if five minutes, ten minutes later, you're still in some kind of pain, then you're actually injuring yourself. And you never want to injure yourself. So then you should be very careful when you come back. Maybe don't sit in the exact same posture again, or don't sit with that discomfort again, because we want to be careful with yourself. Mindfulness students tend not to injure themselves. Zen students, where they actually don't teach much mindfulness, it's more of a concentration practice and a pushing through everything practice. That's where they bust their knees. Lots of Zen students have had knee surgeries, but they're not paying attention. They're not learning to be finely tuned. If you're really finely attentive to pain, I



believe you'll feel the difference between a pain that's okay to experience and pain which is a danger signal.

If it's a danger signal, if you get some sense, then change your posture. If you're not quite sure, is this okay or is it dangerous, change your posture. But you'll probably get the evidence will be there. This one sounds like a danger signal. I should stop doing it. And if it continues, the other thing that is, if it continues, you should be very careful for is if your legs fall asleep. It's very common, especially for new meditators, and it just takes a while, a few days, weeks, months before they work itself out. And the circulation finds new routes to kind of bring blood to all the legs. But if it after, so then if your legs do fall asleep, kind of don't stand up right away. Kind of shake out your legs, massage it. Wait for the sensations to come back.

Once we had someone stand too quickly and she fell and she broke one little bones, a crack fractured one of the little bones in her foot. So you can injure yourself. Just make sure you have the sensations back. But if you stay numb, for more than three or four minutes, you don't feel the blood rushing back or something, then chances are you're pinching a nerve, and you never want to pinch a nerve. You can create lasting damage. So if that happens, that it's more than three or four minutes that you're numb, or you start walking and even after five minutes you're still feeling numb, then never have that kind of numbness again. When you come up to sit, then find a different way of sitting. Switch and change if that numbness starts happening. And I've known people who have, again, mostly in Zen, you have kind of damaged their sciatic nerve, for example. And one friend of mine took about seven years before he could sit in the chair again.

He spent almost his whole waking hours always standing. Everything was standing for him because he had damaged it so badly. So those are the guidelines. We have about seven minutes left in here. And I can walk around, maybe Andrea and I can walk around, and if you have any particular questions or you'd like one of us to look at your posture, we can maybe do a few of you in this time. Because sometimes someone looking from the outside or can make some particular comments that might be helpful. So I'll be with as many of you as I can. But the rest of you, you might want to maybe do walking meditation during the next half hour rev and come back and sit. It's up to you. You can go.