Monday Posture Instructions

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I have had a 50-year adventure with my meditation posture, and over that time, there's been all kinds of different trends. I'll do one thing for 10 years, 20 years, or three months, as my body changes, as I have injuries, and as all kinds of things happen. It feels like probably I've tried all kinds of different postures and done different postures depending on what was needed at different times. And I think some of that's quite natural. The body adapts and changes over time, and so we have to figure out how to read our body, understand it, and know how to meditate with different options.

Some of the postures that we might be in for a while, like for 10 years, might start feeling very familiar, like a homecoming. It could even be that something deep inside just kind of knows what to do in that posture. It's like something clicks, and you already find yourself settled just by taking the posture. So the posture becomes like a refuge. Then you find that you can't use that posture anymore, and you have to change.

Even something as simple as, if you're sitting on the floor, having a different leg in front can throw you off slightly. It feels like you're not quite familiar and home anymore. Then it takes some months to kind of settle into this new way. One of the things I like to emphasize is that if you're aware of posture, you're being aware. But then we also add all kinds of extra ideas on top of it.

There are ideas of shoulds and shouldn'ts. There are ideas of right and wrong. There are ideas of using the posture for some great, ambitious desire to get into a diamond-mind *samādhi*, and the posture will just put you right there if you just get the posture lined up just right. After all, sitting this way, cross-legged, is a yoga position. If you can just get it perfect, everything will just line up and pop.

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You have your everything will be perfect. There's no such thing. But how to be attentive, to use the natural capacity to be aware of posture and all the different little signals we get from the body—physical sensations and feelings—and learn from them, be guided by them, and learn how to attend carefully to them, will guide you into the right posture for the sitting, the time, the decade. It will also support your ability to be wise about pain and discomfort.

I know I've had lots of friends who were practicing in Buddhist traditions where there was a strong emphasis on posture. You had to be really still in that posture and not move for that period of time. But there was very little attention to careful attention, careful mindfulness of the sensations, and getting inside, really being present for the pain that was building up. You just had to be stoic and sit through it.

People ended up injuring themselves. Not a few friends I have had to have knee surgery. Not a few people I know. I know a couple of people who ruined their sciatic nerve because they just sat through the pain in a stoic way and thought they were supposed to. Then it took seven, 10 years for the sciatic nerve to heal.

But in mindfulness practice, the idea is to really bring a lot of care, attention, and love to feel your body. If there is discomfort, feel it carefully and lovingly. Be attuned enough to pick up the subtle sensations that indicate you're entering a danger zone, because pain is a danger signal of sorts. If you really pay attention, you can really feel when the wisdom of the body is revealing itself to you.

Other times, you can feel the difference: no, this particular pain is not danger, not a problem. Actually, it's like my shoulders have been so tense for so long, and they're beginning to relax. As they relax, they bump up against where the tightness is, and they're waking up. It feels like they really ache, but there's no danger there. That's okay.

I can just be with it, and I'm not discouraged. I'm not overwhelmed, and I think I can manage this. This seems good. I can make this part of the practice. So we kind of ride it, feel it, and know it.

If it's uncertain whether it's a danger signal or not, then assume it is. And here at IRC, you're welcome to adjust your posture at any time. There's no need to be frozen and not move. You can even stand if you're sitting down in a chair or on the floor. If it feels like the right thing to do, you can just stand in the middle of the sitting.

If that's what does right by your body, do standing meditation. I'm very fond of standing meditation, as long as I don't do it too long. Some people I know have done it a long time and probably are happy not to do it much longer. But with standing meditation, you can

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move your posture, change, and shift things around. The encouragement is to use it as a mindfulness occasion.

So don't just move automatically at the first indication of discomfort. Really stay with it. What's motivating you to change? Are you just impatient? Are you just aversive to it and trying to get away, or is there a real sense that, “Oh, this is not good, this is not healthy for me”?

Either physically or emotionally, it might be that you're not up for the challenge of being with a difficult pain. It just seems like you've dealt with enough for the day. You hate the idea of coming back to sit if you have to face that again. If emotionally it's just too much for you, by all means, change your posture. Sit in a chair if you're on the floor, or stand if you want.

We have those two. You see some people are lying down, and we have the two window seats where they're relatively good for a variety of different postures: lying down, leaning against the wall, or having your legs straight out. All kinds of things are possible. The danger with lying down, though, is that it's easy to fall asleep and let the mind drift off if you don't really develop the capacity for lying-down meditation.

So I would discourage you from just doing it on a whim. You know, “I'll try it. Other people are doing it. It would be great to do it.” Really, only do it if you feel like there's a real underlying need for your body or situation to do it.

I want to talk a little bit about sitting on the floor and sitting in a chair. For the floor, there are a lot of variations in how to sit. The classic instruction is cross-legged, but actually, sitting full lotus with the legs actually crossed is pretty difficult to do to begin with. It's also even more difficult to do in a sustained way over a long time. It puts a lot of torque and twist on the knees, and sometimes on the ankles, and sometimes that can be injurious.

So I don't even think it's a useful goal to try to do. It has some benefits. But you can sit with one leg in front of the other, so nothing is crossing over at all. The ankles and knees are then at a more natural level of twist.

It also helps to be raised when you do it. That's the function of these round cushions: to lift you up so the knees can hang down at an angle a little bit, and you have a nice tripod of the two knees and your bottom. If you're really tight in the hips, you want to be higher. If you're really open in the hips, then it can be nice to be lower. Some people hardly need anything; maybe an inch is enough.

Some people need two cushions to sit on in order to get their knees down and feel comfortable. That's all. Whatever way you are, it's okay. But it has a lot to do with how open the hips

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are.

Some people know how to do hip-opening exercises for yoga. Doing some hip-opening exercises can sometimes help a lot on retreats, especially if your knees begin hurting. If you sit cross-legged this way—I call it cross-legged, but this is sometimes called Burmese fashion or tailor fashion—even small adjustments can make a big difference in terms of discomfort and in terms of the legs falling asleep. You can sometimes have the knees farther away from each other, or bring them in as close as you can.

The heels can be underneath your body more, or bringing your heels out in front can make a difference. Also, you can get one of these little square cushions and put it underneath your knee. Some people need a lot of elevation and will put a round cushion under their knee. Even a small amount can make a huge difference, sometimes because of an injury and sometimes because of being tight.

It gives you the benefit of this low center of gravity that sitting this cross-legged way provides. It can feel very nice to have a low center of gravity this way. The idea also, with the cushion underneath you and being lifted a little bit, is to have an ever-so-slight accent on the natural curve that most people have in the lower back. Maybe not more than you normally have, but a little bit of strength, a teeny bit of power or uplifting feeling, comes from sitting this way.

Let the small of the back, the very bottom almost of the small of the back, kind of be almost like pushed down a little bit. With just enough curve, it pushes down. At the same time, something in the rest of your upper torso, like the front half, lifts up. There's a kind of two-way movement that goes on. It can feel really good and nice.

The idea is, ideally, if you can, to have a chest that is open. So if you're sitting on the floor, this is one way to sit. We have different kinds of cushions, and I've gone through different eras. There was a long era where I used the half-crescent-moon cushions. They spread the weight to my bottom and my legs, very smooth and wide.

That really helped my bottom a lot and made it easier. Other times, I found that just having weight exactly on my tailbone worked. I take those square cushions we have, the square little ones, and make them into like a wedge that comes in like a diamond. So I'm just sitting on the edge of that little square thing, the corner of it. That's where the only part of my weight is going, right in my tailbone there.

That's what's good for a while, until it isn't anymore. So there are all these different ways. When I sit on a cushion these days, I like to sit on one round cushion, one that has buckwheat in it. There are all these things like beans, little things that you can almost hear crunch when

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you squeeze it. They more easily contort to your body.

I'll often lean forward when I'm sitting on them and adjust and move them around so I have just the right place of contact with my bottom and my weight onto the cushion. The kapok ones, which are a little more like cotton-like material, are more solid and hard. Some people like the solidity of those. I find that helpful.

The other thing to do with these round cushions is another way of sitting: not to sit cross-legged, but to sit on your knees. A nice way to do that is to take these round cushions, put one between your ankles, and sit down like this. How high you want to be there is very variable depending on each person. There are also benches that some people use, and some people really like the benches rather than just sitting on a cushion, where your legs go underneath the bench.

Some people find that the ankles and toes are flattened out too much this way. Also, there can be injuries. What I've done sometimes with injuries is sit this way and then move to the back of the mat so my toes or ankles kind of drape over the back. When I needed a lot of help with that because of a twisted ankle, I got two of these mats and built up more height so I had more fall in the back, more of a natural angle for the foot.

I've had all kinds of variations. Sometimes what I've had to do is go forward on the mat and have my knees over the front, so most of my weight was going on my shins rather than my knees, and my knees were kind of free. I've also done both techniques this way, where I fold these mats in half so they're kind of shorter for me. Then I have my knees over the front and my toes and ankles over the back.

It sounds like a small thing, but sometimes little adjustments can make all the difference for discomfort we have. For sitting in a chair, there are many ways of doing it, and each person is going to find their own way. There are some general guidelines that you may or may not want to use. One guideline that's quite ancient is to sit with the soles of your feet flat on the floor, so there's a solid, strong connection there.

You would not cross your legs over. You wouldn't sit with one leg over the other knee or something. There's something firm and stately about just sitting there with your legs square on the floor, parallel to each other. There's some idea that it's nice to have your knees slightly lower than your hips. If your knees are higher than the hips, then it pushes out the lower part of your back a little bit, and there's a little bit of tension there.

But if your knees are a little bit lower than your hips, it kind of helps keep that little curve there. Some of you have long legs, so you can get these little square cushions and build

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some height. If you have shorter legs, there are these hard black foam rectangles we have that you can put under your feet, so you have a firm foundation for your feet as you're sitting. The classic guideline is to have your legs parallel to each other.

For many reasons, some people prefer to have their legs out to the side at an angle, and they have a wider sense of support there for feeling grounded and centered. If you're using the backrest of the chair, and you don't need to use the backrest of the chair—if the main reason for sitting in a chair is because of the legs—you might want to consider not using the backrest at all. There's something about letting the back be self-supporting that helps. Something about the self-supporting nature of the awareness practice that we cultivate.

There's a kind of waking up that happens when we're engaged in a simple way with our upright posture that we kind of don't get support from if we're leaning back and being supported by something else. But if you have to have a backrest, it's completely fine. There are a few things to use with the backrest. One thing that's interesting is to—maybe I'll go over and sit over there—if you lean forward like this, and then scoot back and push the upper part of your back and hips as firmly as you can comfortably get into the backrest.

Then, like a snake, you snake up with the head first, then the shoulders. As you come down here, you feel pressure against that very bottom there, against the chair. That is one of those pressures that can also kind of lift up, an upward-lifting movement. So you're getting the support of that firm foundation in the bottom, but the rest of the spine can be maybe self-supporting, upright like this, like I'm sitting now, kind of.

If you need to use more of the backrest, one of the cautions around these chairs here is that the backrest does lean back, so you end up leaning a little bit backward. That might be fine. But because you're resting backward, sometimes it's easy to kind of drift off. What some people like to do is—could you hand me that? Yeah. Thank you.

Sometimes, if you can't reach back here the way I described because your legs are not long enough, or like mine are, you can get some of these and put them behind you, low down in the chair. Use as much as you need to get that firm strength behind you to snake up like this. The other thing to do, if you need to use something for your whole backrest, especially if there are shoulder injuries or some kind of injuries, is to get some kind of coil, some kind of blanket, or something to roll up and put down vertically along the spine.

If it's a little bit hard—I'm too tall for this chair here—but sometimes, if you're shorter, this works much better. You can have it on the backrest like this. This works pretty nice for me. Then lean back so it comes up to, I guess, between my shoulder blades. I lean back, and now,

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since I'm a little curved on the top, that helps me with that.

It kind of feels nice to feel the stretch there. It opens up my chest a little bit, which is always good to have in meditation. It kind of pushes my torso a little bit forward, so it's a little bit easier for the shoulders to come back and begin to relax some. So rather than using the whole backrest, you're using only the backrest along the spine. That can be quite a nice thing to do.

Some people have neck injuries, and I've known people who take these round cushions, while sitting against the wall, and put them like this, propping them up against the wall, then lean back so that part of the weight of the head is being supported by the cushion. That helps. People who have scoliosis or shoulder injuries sometimes find it helps to get one of these cushions or something and have one elbow, one arm, raised. If you have scoliosis, it kind of corrects a little bit for the curvature if you do the right side, one side or the other.

If you have an injury, this takes some of the pulling off the shoulder, which can make it easier. I've known people who have done both somehow. You want to be a little bit careful, any way you're sitting, whether cross-legged or in a chair. It helps, I think, if the elbows are kind of lined up with the midpoint of the side of your rib cage.

Because if your hands are too far forward, it kind of pulls the torso forward, and that maybe makes it harder to stay upright. You might want to bring your hands back. If you're sitting cross-legged and have your hands sitting the way I recommend, and your hands are way down on your ankles or heels, that might also be pulling you forward. You can get something, maybe not as big as this, but something just a little bit elevated so your hands are resting on a higher surface.

That makes it easier to keep the chest open and the spine upright rather than being pulled forward. Having good spinal posture and shoulder posture is a wonderful thing to try to get. One little trick of the trade is to take your hands on either side of your hips and lift yourself almost, or as high as you can, off the chair or the cushion. Then, as you release, let the shoulders roll backward.

If you do that, you probably feel more open in the chest. You feel more like the shoulders are beginning to move back. So, yes, you can do it on the floor too. That's a nice thing to do. With all this device-looking that goes on in our culture now, there are more and more people who have a lot of tension in their shoulders and curvature.

There's another little exercise you can do to kind of get lined up a little bit. That's the windmill exercise. Take one shoulder and bring it up close to your ear. Then, keeping the shoulder up,

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stretch forward, so you're stretching out of the shoulder socket almost. Then take your hand straight up.

As it comes down behind you, turn the hand up toward the ceiling. So it twists a little bit in the shoulder, and come down and put your hand palm-up toward the ceiling. Remember: there's the shoulder up first, then stretch, then stretching all the way up. Turn the hand around, then come back and lay the hand palm-upwards. That sometimes can create a nice open feeling.

For you, you probably need to relax now. You did a very nice job, but it's almost too much. So that's something. If it's helpful for you, you can do it a couple of times during the sitting, as long as there's no one behind you that you're going to hit. It's a little bit harder with the wall behind you to do that.

You want to be a little bit careful with your head, because the head is a heavy part of the body. If your head is way forward like this, you have to use a lot of muscles to hold yourself in place, and those muscles will get tired. It's kind of like if I went around all day holding this straight-out arm. Boy, it begins to become work right away.

But if I hold it like this, really close in, it's less work. So you want to keep your head along that center line, center of gravity, so that it doesn't have to work so much. You want to be a little bit careful. They say the classic instruction is to have your ears lining up with your shoulders. You know, not too far forward.

It's fairly common for people to have their legs fall asleep. Usually, for people who are beginners and are just getting used to the posture, the blood circulation finds a way soon enough, and it usually gets better. Just be very careful when your legs are asleep that you don't stand up quickly. There was once, many years ago, someone who stood up too quickly and fell and fractured one of the little bones in her foot because of that.

So you have to make sure that you stand up and wait until you have sensations in your foot. Shake it out, massage it. If it takes more than two minutes to get the sensations back, then the chances are that it's not an issue of circulation, but you're actually pinching a nerve. You never want to pinch a nerve.

If that same numbness comes, then change your posture somehow, and don't allow that kind of numbness, falling-asleep feeling, to happen again. Then you know, okay, this is not good. Make some adjustments so you can avoid having it fall asleep that way. In terms of pain, the last thing I'll say is that I believe if you're really carefully mindful and really listen or sense deeply into the pain, you can feel whether it's dangerous or not dangerous.

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If there's any doubt about it, just move, change your posture, and adjust for it. But if you do stay with your pain, and it seems like, “Okay, I can stay with it and practice with it,” then at the end of the sitting, if by the time you get to the bottom of the steps the pain is still there, then you might be injuring yourself. So you want to be very careful not to repeat that particular pain again. Usually, there's a little bit of movement, like even getting on the steps, and it kind of dissipates quickly enough.

So those are some of the points. If some of you, in practice discussion, would like to bring up questions or concerns, you can. That's a good place to bring it up. There are a lot of variations that I don't want to spend so much time with. Sometimes it's nice, especially when the practice discussions are indoors, if you want to bring your cushion with you if you're sitting on the floor, so that we can look at your posture and see what we can do.

So we have about 15 minutes before the next sitting. You can go stretch and take care of yourself, then come back, or you can stay here. Both Matthew and I can stay also. If any of you would like us to look at your posture directly, or if you have a question you'd like to ask, we'll walk around and address whatever your posture concern might be. So, thank you.

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