

Beginning Meditation

Choosing the correct posture

There are many routes to the meditative state, in all the many modern and ancient texts, and all the many varied techniques offered one thing they all seem to agree on is....an upright spine, whether this be in a chair, on a cushion, supported by a wall, kneeling or cross-legged; all sources tend to agree that a comfortable position and an upright spine are the two necessities for a successful meditation practice. How to meditate, or what to meditate on, is a different matter entirely with many, many different techniques written about!

Firstly, it is important to realise that meditation is not relaxation, the mind is indeed active and attentive during meditation, and therefore the chosen conditions and postures must reflect this awareness. Meditation begins with concentration.

“Meditation does not make the mind dull. Rather in meditation the mind is still but razor sharp, silent but vibrant with energy.” Iyengar 1990

Lying down to meditate is an option but only as a last resort, simply because lying down often results in deep relaxation instead of the desired alertness

Why is it that the must the spine be erect? Because the spine is the vehicle through which certain nerves pass, affecting the general posture of the whole body. The spinal column has much influence on the health, as well as the satisfaction of even the mind, because of the confluence of varieties of nerves through the column of the spine. (Swami Krishnananda)

The purpose of the chosen meditational posture, is to bring about a balance in the functioning of the nerves and the muscles of the body, so that any kind of agitation, or friction, or discomfort that one may usually feel will be eliminated by a harmonious positioning of the muscles, which are connected with the nervous system

Most books on meditation agree with this and can narrow the options down more , to sitting on a chair, kneeling or a cross-legged position, the most important aspect being “ that you can comfortably maintain (the posture) without having to change it for the duration of your meditation session” Proto 1991

“Meditation requires one to sit straight and still for long periods of time” Myers 1996
So, let’s address these variations individually;

1) Sitting on a chair – this is a great option for those who find kneeling or cross-legged simply too uncomfortable or even painful. To perform this posture simply sit on the edge of a chair with the head neck and spine in a straight line, knees and feet comfortably apart and feet planted firmly on the floor, or perhaps on firm yoga blocks if the feet won’t reach the floor. Avoid leaning in to the back of the chair as

this can have similar effects to lying down, being all too easy to relax and not stay alert. Hands rest on thighs.

This position helps maintain an upright spine and is easily obtainable by most people, it isn't however as stabilising as a seated position.

A kneeling office type chair is also a useful aid.

2) Kneeling, or Vajrasana – for the basic posture start in a kneeling position with thighs together and the head and torso aligned. The feet should be together with the upper surfaces facing down and heels slightly apart, the body then lowers onto the heels.

If this can't be performed comfortably, blocks can be placed between the heels to sit back on to, or a bench used. Also using blankets under the feet and ankles can be useful to ensure complete comfort for less distraction.

3) A cross-legged option.

“When you are sitting correctly in a seated cross-legged posture, the pose is self-supporting” Coulter

A cross-legged option really does give you a steady stable base from which the spine can effortlessly arise, and props can be used to help achieve it. Using blocks or blankets to raise the hips and take tension of the adductors is a good option

“If you can maintain one of these cross-legged postures comfortably, it is good, because these postures make you feel very grounded and, because you lock yourself into a sort of closed circuit, keep the energy in” Proto 1991

The type of cross-legged position really depends on the individuals flexibility, one can begin with simple cross –legged, position or easy posture.

Also, Swastikasana or the auspicious pose, where the feet are placed between the thigh and calf muscles of the opposite leg

Or, siddhasana, the accomplished pose or perfect pose where one heel presses into the perineum and the other heel presses the pubis, and with upturned sole placed between the thigh and calf of the opposite leg.

Finally, of course there is the option of the infamous lotus posture or half lotus although for most westerners the full lotus would not be able to be comfortably maintained for a long meditation session.

One could use the support of a wall for the back when first starting out in seated postures although as with lying or leaning back in a chair I personally find this can be too relaxing and can lead to drowsiness.

The main point to remember is that you should be upright with ease *Sthira Sukham Asanam* (Seated posture should be steady and comfortable.)

Preferred conditions for Meditation

Having established how to sit for meditation, where to sit and the preferred conditions are also an important factor.

It seems common sense that when sitting for a spiritual practice the correct attitude would be useful even bathing before meditation has been suggested, a similar idea as 'putting on your Sunday best' for church.

The act of preparing a space and yourself all helps in creating the right mindset, but again these ideas are nice but by no means essential, the only real essentials are, comfort (poised and stable sitting) and an undisturbed space and time.

Meditation is a discipline, one which like any other discipline takes time and determination to establish, therefore creating the right environment, ensuring the correct conditions can be very useful, although not essential, as meditation can occur anywhere under any condition, but to develop a daily practice of meditation there are some preferred conditions:

- 1) Clean, tidy, uncluttered location
- 2) Undisturbed, quiet
- 3) Regular time and place - "little by little, through patience and repeated effort, the mind will become stilled in the self" Ch 6 V25 Bhagavad Gita

If possible sit at the same time each day; early morning or early evening are ideal, or for some mid afternoon may work.

- 4) Comfortable clothing- nothing restricting. Setting aside a special outfit just for meditation can be nice e.g. a white tracksuit or pyjamas

- 5) Not after meals - a full stomach impedes circulation of the blood and respiration; although an empty stomach can be a distraction too.

"those who eat too much or too little, who sleep too much or too little, will not succeed in meditation" Ch 6 VI6 Bhagavad Gita

- 6) Not when tired - Meditation requires a clear alert mind, a tired mind will not be able to focus as required.

If it is possible to dedicate a small space (or for the lucky an entire room) to meditation it is well worth the effort. Corner off an area of a room with screens or curtains perhaps? A low table to place a candle, plant, crystals or inspiring pictures on. You may like to start each session of meditation by chiming a bell, chanting Om three times, or lighting a candle and/or incense, simply to set the scene and mentally prepare your self. We are all creatures of habit and our minds thrive on structure, rituals and discipline so by creating your own sequence or 'ritual', to begin meditation I feel you will be far more successful in a continued practice. Before long the chime of the bell or the waft of the scented candle will immediately bring you into the right state of mind!