

Finding Your Seat

- by Daryl Vansier

For most of us the word *yoga* brings to mind a series of postures, each of which have a Sanskrit name ending with the suffix *-asana*. Though the practice of *asanas* represents only one of the eight limbs (ash-tanga) of yoga, it embodies the essence of the yogic path.

The true meaning of asana is “*seat*”. Thus *tadhasana* could be translated as “mountain seat” rather than “mountain pose”, and even an inverted pose like *sirsasana* could be translated as ‘head seat’ rather than “head stand”. The fundamental attitude sought in each posture is to *settle* into the effort, to affirm the dynamic balance between **being** and **doing**. In this sense, we *sit* into each posture, whether we are standing on one foot, balancing our legs over our head and elbows, arching backwards, bending forward, or sitting in a spinal twist. Our primary intention in yoga is to “root” our doing in the “ground” of being.

To truly comprehend the meaning of *asana*, the third limb of Patanjali’s Ashtanga system, we need to investigate the seventh limb of yoga: *dhyaan*, or meditation, where *asana* finds its purest expression.

Dhyaanyoga

In meditation, or *dhyaanyoga*, **finding your seat** is to be understood physically, mentally, and spiritually. Meditation is the activity of stabilizing the body, and anchoring the wavering mind in this still vessel. This allows us to find our spiritual “seat”: to discover our original home which is the essential foundation of our being, the seat of our consciousness.

No one would aspire to ascend the floors of a building with a weak or shaky foundation, so it should come as no surprise that proper instruction in establishing a stable sitting posture is fundamental to mastering the successive levels of meditation.



Padmasana

Padmasana means “lotus seat”. It is the traditional cross-legged posture used for meditation, represented in the Buddha statues we have seen. However, other variations of *padmasana* such as the “half lotus”, “quarter lotus”, or Burmese posture can be used. One can also sit in a kneeling posture, and even in a chair. Most importantly, one should find a position which allows you to remain both comfortable and alert during the period of your sitting. With appropriate stretching exercises and physical supports such as cushions or a bench, you will discover the ideal position that will facilitate your practice of meditation.

The following exercises will help prepare your body for *padmasana* or its variations.

Butterfly Pose

Baddhakonasana

Sitting in “cobbler” pose, draw the heels of your feet close to your groins and join the soles of your feet together. If your hips are tight and your knees are now higher than the upper rims of your pelvis, place a firm cushion or folded blanket under your sit bones to elevate the rear of your pelvis. This will correct the tendency for your body to fall back behind your center of gravity, and help your pelvic “bowl” to tilt forward. This anterior tilt allows the lumbar spine to shift more easily into its natural forward curve, providing the proper angle to support the vertical alignment of the rest of the spinal column.

Now place your hands on the floor just behind your buttocks and extend your arms pushing off the fingers to press the heart forward as you take deep chest breaths. Drop the shoulders back and lift through the crown of your head

to fully extend the core of your torso. If you can, lift your sit bones off the floor and tilt them back as you lean the upper body forward. Now let them settle down onto the floor and you may feel your weight rolling over the front of your sit bones.

Sustaining the forward and upward extension of your upper body, transfer your hands back to the front and clasp your feet to pull forward. If your hips are open enough so that your knees are close to the floor, open the upper edges of your feet apart like the pages of a book and fold forward from the hip joints, drawing your chest towards the soles of your feet as your elbows press into your thighs .

Only go as far as you can go without your back bending. If for you this means staying in the upright position, there's still plenty to do. Focus on pressing the soles of the feet together on the exhalation to bring the knees closer to the floor. Open your heart on the inhalation as the shoulders draw back, and extend the crown of the head towards the sky.



Half Bound Lotus

Ardha Baddha Padmasana (variation)

Release your feet and extend your left leg forward with the foot flexed and the toes pointing straight up. Slide your left hand under your right foot and cup the outside ankle bone in the palm of your hand. Lift your foot and bring the heel as close to your navel as possible while clasping the ankle joint firmly with the fingers. This will result in a twisting motion to encourage the sole of the foot to face upwards parallel to the floor. Place your right hand over the right knee and gently press down towards the floor.



Be sure to keep your spine straight as in *Baddha Konasana*. The combination of these maneuvers will train the hip, knee and ankle joints to rotate into a cooperative positioning for *padmasana*. After a few minutes of this stretch, repeat on the opposite side.

Cow Face Pose *Gomukhasana (variation)*

Having stretched open the major joints (hips, knees, and ankles) of the foundation of your posture, it's a good idea to release the shoulder girdle so as to minimize any resistance to the ascending motion of the spine.

Bring your left arm behind you, then follow with your right, reaching for your left elbow with your right hand. If you are able to grasp the elbow, draw it in towards the spine, and work your left hand up your back between your shoulder blades. Then release your right hand from the elbow and bring your right elbow over your head, reaching behind your neck and upper back to clasp the fingers, hand, or wrist of your left hand.

Simultaneously raise the right elbow over your head in line with your spine and pull down with your left arm.

If your shoulders are quite flexible, and you want to intensify the stretch, lift with upper elbow and head and lean your upper body forwards towards the floor, bending from the hips and keeping your spine extended straight.



If you are not able to join the hands, return to the former position of grasping the left elbow, or working along the forearm with the right hand. Whatever position you take, keep your spine straight, lifting up through the crown of the head and dropping your tailbone, so as to counteract the tendency to arch your lower back.



Once you have reached your apparent limit, balance your effort with an attitude of surrender, allowing your breath to flow with ease, letting go of the “shoulds” in your “shouders” and accepting your present position or *seat* of practice.

Release your hands or arms, and reverse your arms to repeat the procedure on the opposite side.

Symbol of Yoga

Yoga Mudra

The name of this pose suggests that it expresses the essence of yoga: joining the pairs of opposites within our human nature in an open-hearted salute to our Divine Source.



Clasp your hands together behind your back, palm to palm, and fully extend your arms so that the elbow joints straighten and the heels of your hands join together. This will cause the shoulder blades to move close to one another, releasing accumulated tension inside the shoulders and their attachments in your chest. Breathe deeply and receive the energy into your expanded heart area.

Make sure that both forearms and hands are aligned at the wrists. It is quite common that the hands will bend towards one side or the other without your feeling it. This usually indicates that one of the shoulders is resisting the movement. Often this is simply tension caused by habitual holding in that area. Repeated stretching in this mis-alignment will reinforce the imbalance at the shoulder and sometimes result in a weakening of the wrist and elbow joints on the compressed side. If this condition already exists, precise alignment of the wrists, arms and hands in this posture will be very effective in correcting the tendency.

Now raise both extended arms behind you, breathing into your expanded chest, then fold forward as you exhale, bringing your arms over your head, and let your head bow forward towards the floor.

The back of your neck will release and create more space for the shoulders to accommodate the arm extension. Balance this attitude of surrender with attention to keeping your hands firmly clasped together, as you breathe deeply and evenly, in and out.

To release, breathe in as you lift with your arms, drawing the torso up gradually to a vertical position, and release your hands and arms as you exhale. Your body is now ready to assume *padmasana* or one of its variations.

Building the Pyramid

Now you are ready to “snap” yourself into your meditation seat. The lotus posture (*padmasana*) or one of its variations is the ideal arrangement for your legs, provided that your hips, knees, and ankles are open enough to assume the proper position. The proper position is a tetrahedron, a pyramid-like structure, in which the three angles at the base - your two knees and your sit bones - are pressing equally into the ground or floor, and the apex of the pyramid - the crown of your head - is perched over the center, equidistant from the three corners of the base.

The pelvis needs to be tilted slightly forward to distribute your weight evenly over your sit bones and knees. This

also allows the spine to assume its position of equilibrium, in which the lumbar and cervical curves are balanced, such that the head sits easily on the gravity axis, with a minimum of compression on the discs between the vertebrae, and little stress on the supporting muscles and tendons of the spine. This forward tilt will usually require a prop such as a cushion or wedge to elevate the rear portion of your pelvis. How much, and how they are placed, depends on the posture you choose to take, and the flexibility of your joints.

In **full lotus** draw one foot into the groin area with the heel as close to your navel as possible, rotating the ankle so that the dorsal (top) side of your foot rests on the thigh and the sole faces upward. Cross the other leg over this one, placing the foot in the same way, and spread the knees apart to draw the heels of both feet closer together at the center of your abdomen. In this position, little or no elevation is necessary under your sit bones because the extreme external rotation of your legs naturally projects the pelvis forward towards the knees.



In **half lotus** one foot is drawn towards the body with the heel as close to the perineum or pelvic floor as possible, and the other crosses over into the fold of the upper groin, with the heel close to the navel and the sole turned upwards as in full lotus.



The **quarter lotus** is similar, with the upper foot resting in the crease between the calf and the thigh instead of over the top of the thigh.

The third variation is the **Burmese** position with the second foot placed directly in front of the first on the floor. Whichever of these three positions you choose, be sure to spread the knees wide apart as in the full lotus to broaden the base of your foundation. This also brings the feet closer to the center of your body, gathering the energy of the extremities into the core channel.



Now place a firm cushion or set of cushions under the sit bones in such a way as to incline the pelvis forward enough so that both knees are in contact with the floor. You should be leaning on this support rather than sitting back as on a regular chair. If the incline is too pronounced this may compress the lower back or cause you to slide down. If it is too shallow the low back will tend to round and compress the abdominal diaphragm, impeding the flow of your breath, and the vital energy (*prana*) it carries.



If the condition of your hips or knees at this time does not allow you to assume any of these four cross-legged postures comfortably, then you have a fifth option: the **kneeling position**.

As in the previous postures, the knees are wide apart and the feet close to your body, this time with the dorsal sides of your feet extended on the floor and the soles turned upward. To reduce compression on the feet, ankles, and in the knee joints, it is preferable to elevate the pelvis with a slanted bench as traditionally used by Zen Buddhist monks, or firm thick cushions between your feet. Straddling

a firm bolster can also work. Again it is important that the angle of the incline provides just enough forward tilt of the pelvis to allow the spine and head to be aligned in equilibrium, so that a minimum of effort is required to support the upper body, and the energy flows freely through the central channel.

There is also the alternative of sitting on a **chair**. Though this option does not provide as stable a foundation as the positions close to the floor, it is better than a position you cannot assume with balance and ease. An advanced meditator who attended one of my courses always sat on a chair due to restrictions from a surgical intervention to her spine.

The props you use will depend on the length of your legs and the height of the chair. As your support should still come from your own center of gravity, the back of a chair should not be used. Relying on such supports seems more comfortable in the short term, but ends up weakening the spine, and our capacity to sustain alertness. The knees need to be lower than the hips for the pelvis to tilt forward naturally. Draw the feet close to the chair behind the knees without lifting the heels off the floor. If the pelvis is still not inclined sufficiently to align the spine as described earlier, place a wedge or firm cushion between your sit bones and the chair.



Having established your seat, allow your hands to rest on your lap, thighs, or knees and visualize your head lifting effortlessly like a helium balloon and your spine like the string attaching it to this solid base.

Keeping Your Seat

Once you have found your seat the work of meditation is to **keep** it. This requires a close cooperation between mind and body as in any other *asana*. Though there are several techniques (*kriya*) to occupy the mind during meditation, your primary focus is to be vigilant in your awareness of your body/mind's tendency to err from its central attitude of equilibrium and equanimity.

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