

Meditation: Positions & Conditions

Positions for Meditation:

We can find the main 'classic' positions used for meditation within the HYP.

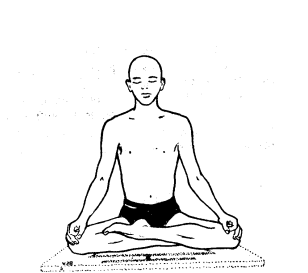
These are generally quite challenging for most of us especially as we are unaccustomed to sitting on the floor and often have stiff hips and ankles. Generally they all direct the blood supply into the upper body as the blood supply to the legs is reduced. More specifically they have a direct effect upon pranic flow, where for example in the commentary of the HYP on page 110 it states "while the posture (of siddhasana) is being maintained, electrical and pranic impulses are constantly flowing up to the brain, purifying the nadis and removing all blockages" or how padmasana helps to balance prana. Generally we can say that they **direct and clear the way for prana to move upwards towards the spinal column and the brain, i.e. from muladhara chakra to ajna chakra**. For more information on the specific effects of seated poses see the HYP Chapter 1.

Regarding these classic Hatha Yoga poses in general terms we can say that:

- They should not be practiced when any discomfort is experienced as in the longer term this can cause injury, particularly for the knees
- All 'cross-legged' poses are contraindicated for sciatica and sacral infections
- The spine should be straight and the body upright (Sthira), with a natural lordosis evident, which means for many people the anterior tilt of the pelvis needs to be assisted by raising buttocks on padding which is ideally slightly sloped downwards.
- There should also be a softness and sense of ease, especially around the face and jaw. (sukha).
- If knees do not touch the ground then they need to be padded beneath.

Note: In Swami Muktibodhananda Saraswati's commentary on the Hatha Yoga Pradipika in Ch1 v17 we are clearly told that for Hatha Yoga asana refers to different specific body positions aimed at altering and concentrating pranic flow whereas in Classical or Raja Yoga of Patanjali's Yoga Sutras 'asana' generally simply refers to the position and overall attitude for meditation. This is important to remember.

Classical poses from the HYP



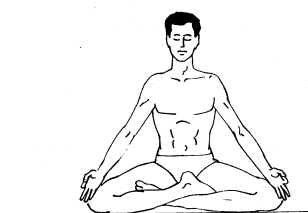
Swastikasana/Auspicious Pose

Place the soles of the feet against the inner side of the thighs. HYP Ch1 v19



Padmasana/Lotus Pose

Both legs crossed above the thigh, sole of feet upwards and heels touching pelvic bone.



Siddhasana/Accomplished Pose

Press one heel to the perineum & the other foot upon the top of the genitals at the pubis. For men only. For women see Siddha Yoni Asana. HYP Ch1 v35



Siddha Yoni Asana/Female Accomplished Pose

Lower heel against vagina opening, upper heel against clitoris, drawing toes into space between calf and thigh. HYP Ch1



Ardha Padmasana/Half Lotus Pose

One foot against opposite thigh, other foot placed on top of the opposite thigh.



Vajrasana/Thunderbolt Pose

Kneeling place the buttocks between heels with the right big toe overlapping the left.



Sukhasana/Easy Pose

Right foot beneath left thigh and left foot beneath the right thigh, or vice versa.

Burmese Pose

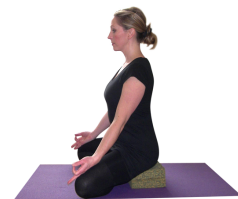
A more recent development that is suitable for many students where one leg lies in front of the other. For most people the hips will need to be raised using blocks.

The use of modifications/aids

Remember that the pose we choose for meditation must be able to enable us to have ease and attention i.e. possess the qualities of 'Sukha & Sthira', and enable the spine to be upright so we must find the most suitable pose, using aids as needed.

Placing blocks or meditation cushion beneath the buttocks

This is a great modification as it helps to give a slight anterior pelvic tilt making it much easier to sit upright with ease. This will be necessary if the lower back muscles, hamstrings and/or adductors are tight. It is also important that the knees are resting upon a firm surface so it may be necessary to place padding under the knees. **NB take care that the knees are lower than the hips otherwise the body will not be properly grounded and the muscles cannot truly relax. (very important for late pregnancy)**



Use a meditation stool

Meditation stools can be made or purchased and they are very good at creating an erect kneeling pose without compressing the knees. If a stool is unavailable and a student wishes to kneel another possibility is to place a block between the buttocks and heels and again this helps to alleviate pressure upon the knees. Note: the stool slants slightly forwards to aid the anterior pelvic tilt so we can sit upright more easily.





Sitting astride a bolster

Another popular position for meditation is to sit astride a bolster.

Sitting in a chair (Maitryasana)

If a student cannot sit upon the ground then there is absolutely no reason why a student should not sit in a chair. When sitting in a chair the student must not sit back against the chair because this easily leads to a slumped position. Also if the feet cannot be flat to the floor and the thighs remain parallel to the ground then we must place blocks beneath the feet.



Any others?

Preparation for seated meditation practices?

It is very important that before sitting for extensive periods of time, especially if a cross-legged pose is used, we warm up the relevant joints and muscles. In particular the hips, knees and ankles will need a little mobilization. If this is not done then over time we can create injury, especially for the knee joints. Prior to meditation even a short general asana practice will always be helpful as preparation, and pranayama is excellent preparation, helping to increase sattva.

Other considerations when teaching meditation.....

Students can gradually learn how to encounter each challenging situation as it arises and at first mindfulness type meditations are useful to help students more skillfully manage them when they do arise, later we can of course include reminders of how best negotiate each situation within the teaching points for different meditations.

1. Physical discomfort: the body must remain relaxed for the mind to be relaxed so students need to know how to modify a seated position for comfort, and we can give lots of time for students to really settle at the start of a practice for this. We can also offer individual suggestions during the meditation if we see signs that a student is struggling. It is also very important that students know that they can adjust their position **mindfully** whenever it is needed, and initially it is helpful to do meditations on sensing the physical body. Ultimately however with practice the body must ideally remain absolutely still, echoing the stillness of the mind.

2. Busy mind: the mind's nature is to think and we need to know that it will have a different momentum at different times. Ultimately in meditation it is unhelpful to ask students not to think i.e. to try to control the mind, rather we need to **let it naturally unwind**, just returning to the primary focus whenever we are lost to thought. Indeed by not attempting to control the mind insights may arise which is a very significant possibility, and this approach is also considered to be a type of cleansing of 'impurity' as thoughts can be allowed to rise and fall away. Our challenge here is to simply observe **without becoming involved in a narrative** and once we have become lost simply move back to our focus. We can move on to practice meditations focused upon watching the mind to learn how to be with thought.

3. Emotions arising: when we sit quietly emotions may arise and again this can also be a form of cleansing and insight may arise, so we do not seek to regulate emotions, rather we notice and release our attention from them returning to our primary focus; although if a particularly strong emotion arises then we can always be with the sensation in the body for a while, **not thinking about but just feeling it**, returning to the focus as the feeling subsides. This can be extremely healing as strong emotion has a kind of electrical charge which when 'digested' by willingly feeling it, becomes dissipated returning its more neutral energy to us. We can practice being with emotion as part of watching the mind, making sure we do not allow emotion to overwhelm us to the point where the fight, flight or freeze response is activated – rather when there are intense emotions we work at the edges with a loving attention.

4. Noise: we can prevent noise from being a distraction by taking our attention to it, just watching it, then drawing attention inwardly again; noise should not be a problem & can even be very helpful by engendering a surrendering attitude or detachment.

To learn these skills it is very helpful if we can start our journey into meditation with mindful type meditations and then gradually move into concentration type techniques.

For differentiation in our classes we can also stage our teaching somewhat by allowing some students to leave the meditation sooner and relax back into a restful pose if needed. And where there are several stages as we progress through a meditation students can also elect to stay at an earlier stage if it is more suitable.

Note: Each time we experience a challenge it is a great opportunity to **develop detachment** which is key as ultimately everything experienced can be held within a soft space of awareness, including our feelings of our separate self !!

Classical Texts:

There is little written in the classical texts concerning the conditions and positions for the practice of meditation but when you can please take your time to read through the following passages:

Bhagavad Gita

Chapter 6, especially v10 to 18 (page 133 Easwaran 2nd Edition)

Upanishads

Shvetashvatara Upanishad II v1 to 10 (page 162 Easwaran 2nd Edition)

Katha Upanishad Part One [3] v1 to 15 (page 81 Easwaran 2nd Edition)

Patanjali's Yoga Sutras

Ch2 v46 to v48 (page 130 Bouanchaud translation)

