

Mindfulness in Plain English
Chapter 6
“What to do with your Body”
Bhante Gunaratana

Selected Quotes

The practice of meditation has been going on for several thousand years. That is quite a bit of time for experimentation, and the procedure has been very, very thoroughly refined. Buddhist practice has always recognized that the mind and body are tightly linked and that each influences the other. Thus, there are certain recommended physical practices that will greatly help you to master this skill. Keep in mind.....that these postures are practice aids. Meditation does not mean sitting in the lotus position. It is a mental skill. It can be practiced anywhere you wish. But these postures will help you to learn this skill, and they speed your progress and development. So use them.

General Rules

The purpose of the various postures is threefold. First, they provide a stable feeling in the body. This allows you to remove your attention from such issues as balance and muscular fatigue, so that you can center your concentration on the formal object of meditation. Second, they promote physical immobility, which is then reflected by an immobility of mind. This creates a deeply settled and tranquil concentration. Third, they give you the ability to sit for a long period of time without yielding to the meditator’s three main enemies - pain, muscular tension, and falling asleep.

The most essential thing is that you sit with your back straight. The spine should be erect with the spinal vertebrae held like a stack of coins. All of this is done in a relaxed manner.....There should be no muscular tension involved in keeping the back straight. Sit light and easy. The rest of the body just hangs from it in a loose, relaxed manner. This is going to require a lot of experimentation on your part.

Your objective is to achieve a posture in which you can sit for the entire session without moving at all.

Clothing

The clothes you wear for meditation should be loose and soft. If they restrict blood flow or put pressure on nerves, the result will be pain and/or tingling numbness that we normally refer to as our “legs going to sleep.” If you are wearing a belt, loosen it. Don’t wear tight pants or pants made of thick material. Long skirts are a good choice for women.....Take your shoes off, and if your stockings are tight and binding, take them off, too.

Traditional Postures

When you are sitting on the floor in the traditional Asian manner, you need a cushion to elevate your spine. Choose one that is relatively firm and at least three inches thick when compressed. Sit close to the front edge of the cushion and let your crossed legs rest on the floor in front of you. If the floor is carpeted, that may be enough to protect your shins and ankles from pressure. If not, you will probably need some sort of padding for your legs. A folded blanket

will do nicely. Don't sit all the way back on the cushion. This position causes its front edge to press into the underside of your thigh, causing nerves to pinch.

There are any number of ways you can fold your legs. We will list four in ascending order of preference.

- a. Native American style. Your right foot is tucked under the left knee and left foot is tucked under your right knee.
- b. Burmese style: Both of your legs lie flat on the floor from knee to foot. They are parallel with one in front of the other.
- c. Half lotus. Both of your knees touch the floor. One leg and foot lie flat along the calf of the other leg.
- d. Full lotus. Both knees touch the floor, and your legs are crossed at the calf. Your left foot rest on the right thigh, and your right foot rests on the left thigh. Both soles turn upward.

In all these postures, your hands are cupped one on the other, and they rest on your lap with the palms turned upward. The hands lie just below the navel with the bend of each wrist pressed against the thigh. This arm position provides firm bracing for the upper body. Don't tighten your neck or shoulder muscles. Relax your arms. Your diaphragm is held relaxed, expanded to maximum fullness. Don't let tension build up in the stomach area. Your chin is up. Your eyes can be open or closed, if you keep them open, fix them on the tip of your nose or in a middle distance straight in front.

Half and full lotus positions are the traditional meditation postures in Asia. And the full lotus is considered best. Once you are locked into this position, you can be completely immovable for a very long period. Since it requires a considerable flexibility in the legs, not everybody can do it. Besides, the main criterion by which you choose a posture for yourself is not what others say about it. It is your own comfort. Choose a position that allows you to sit the longest without pain, without moving. Experiment with different postures. The tendons will loosen with practice.

Using a Chair

Sitting on the floor may not be feasible for you because of pain or some other reason. No problem. You can always use a chair instead. Pick one that has a level seat, a straight back, and no arms. It is best to sit in such a way that your back does not lean against the back of the chair. The furniture of the seat should not dig into the underside of your thighs. Place your legs side by side, feet flat on the floor. As with the traditional postures, place both hands on your lap cupped on upon the other. Don't tighten your neck or shoulder muscles, and relax your arms, your eyes can be open or closed.

In all the above posture, remember your objectives. You want to achieve a state of complete physical stillness, yet you don't want to fall asleep. Recall the analogy of the muddy water. You want to promote a totally settled state of the body, which will engender corresponding mental settling. There must also be a state of physical alertness, which can induce the kind of mental clarity you seek. So experiment. Your body is a tool for creating desired mental states. Use it judiciously.