

Traditional Buddhist Dharma, Meditation,  
Postures, and Chanting

# DOORWAYS

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# Credits

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## Preface

The potential readers and users of this liturgy are English speakers and English-as-a-second-language educated, often young adults who are well educated, personally resourceful, highly motivated, and dedicated to exploring spiritual insights. We intend to make this meditation reflect the loving kindness that is the application of Buddhist insights.

It is also essential to keep the oral tradition alive and wholesome in the most effective way, while respecting differences in cultural and individual expectations. It is important to provide the reader with sufficient skillful means and insights to help them achieve their own enlightenment.

In this presentation, the Suttas chanted are translated line by line. The Suttas that are normally read are in columns.

## Introduction

Getting from where you are to where you are supposed to be has been a spiritual pilgrimage for thousands, and possibly tens of thousands, of years. People who go on these pilgrimages often make significant changes in their lives; some never come back.

The ways spiritual pilgrims explain their insightful experiences often conflict with ordinary expectations. The Buddhist spiritual pilgrimage often leads to loving kindness as people move from confusion and doubt into insight and wisdom. What seems odd to many spiritual pilgrims is why more people do not choose enlightenment over confusion and doubts.

How the ancient Egyptians, Babylonians, Chinese, and other early-established traditions managed these pilgrimages is well documented, underscoring the historical and personal value of these practices. How much these spiritual customs

influenced the more contemporary traditions of Taoism, Confucianism, Hinduism, Christianity, and Buddhism is a matter of academic debate. That these ancient spiritual traditions had extraordinary value is never criticized.

All of the current traditional spiritual practices are 2,000 to 3,000 years old and have been preserved to an astonishing degree. That durability and integrity have value, are historically established, and involve a personal investment in that value. An insight for beginning students is that twenty-first-century enlightened people have the same insights and experiences as ancient ones. Enlightenment is the same for all people.

The current application of ancient doctrine suggests that if you are in a state of spiritual, emotional, and mental confusion, there are practices that will help you discover places where enlightenment resides. The pilgrimage from here to there begins with the first step...

*Upasaka Yogi Yasha, Bangkok, Thailand, 2 April, 2014*

## Insight Meditation

Theravada Buddhist insight meditation is derived from the original Pali word ‘bhavana’, which means ‘to make grow’ or ‘to develop’. In addition, another word is called ‘kammattana’, literally meaning foundation of work - works of the mind. Insight meditation is primarily focused on cultivating the mind and wisdom. The inner transformation rather than external development is encouraged. Insight meditation is about a concerted effort to change how the mind works.

The value of insight meditation is not concerned with how one may wish to be good or smart if one cannot change the desires that make one act the way one does. Change will be difficult, as some may realize they are impatient with themselves and others, and may promise, from now on, not

to be so impatient. But an hour later, they may be critical and shouting simply because they are unaware that impatience has arisen. When this happens, meditation helps develop the awareness and energy needed to transform habitual mental patterns.

To live physically, we need salt. But if you were to eat a kilogram of salt, it would kill you. To live in the modern world, you need a car, but if you don't follow traffic rules or drive while drunk, it becomes a dangerous machine. Insight meditation can be like this. Insight meditation is essential for our mental health and well-being. If you practice inappropriately, it could cause problems.

Insight meditation is not clinically therapeutic. Some people have problems similar to obsessive behavior, depression, irrational fears, or delusional expectations. They think meditation is an instant cure for their problem. They start meditating, and sometimes their problem gets worse. If one has such a problem, one should seek professional help

Other people may over-reach themselves. They take up meditation, but instead of going gradually and systematically, they meditate with too much energy for too long, and soon they are exhausted.

If you invest in an insightful meditation and practice it sensibly, it is one of the best strategies for developing the meditational skillful means to manage your life in an enlightened way.

*Ven. Somphong Ph.D.*

*Wat Arun*

*Bangkok, Thailand*

*5 May 2014*

# Doorway One

Metta

Dharma of Loving Kindness

*Essay by*

*Phramaha Prasarn Pasano*

*“An ancient mystic’s vow: Be nice to people, including yourself.”*

## Loving-kindness

Historically and spiritually, the benefit of doing loving-kindness meditation is that you will find very positive changes taking place within yourself. You will find that you can be more accepting and forgiving towards yourself, and your feelings towards your loved ones will grow. You will find yourself making friends with people you used to be indifferent toward, and noticing that the ill will or resentment you have toward some people will lessen and eventually dissolve.

Loving Kindness Meditation can begin by turning your attention to yourself and saying words like: “may I be well and happy, peaceful and calm, protected from dangers, free from hatred, and may my heart be filled with loving kindness, compassion, and caring.”

Then think of a loved person and imagine the same insightful meditation. Then a neutral person, that is, someone you neither like nor dislike, and finally a disliked person, wishing each of them well as you do so. If you know someone who is sick, unhappy, or encountering difficulties, you can include them in your meditation, and very often you will find their situation improving.

The mind, when properly developed, is a very powerful instrument. If we can learn to focus our mental energy and project it towards others, it can affect them. You may have had the experience of being in a crowded room and feeling that someone is watching you. You turn around and, sure enough, someone is staring at you. What has happened is that you have picked up that other person’s mental energy. Loving Kindness Meditation is like this. We project positive mental energy towards others, and it gradually transforms them.

For oneself, it always begins with developing a loving acceptance to overcome any feelings of self-doubt or negativity. It means you are ready to systematically cultivate

loving-kindness towards others.

- *Respect loving people - such as a spiritual teacher, a monk, or a mentor.*
- *Dearly beloved people, including close family members and friends.*
- *Neutral people - somebody you know, but have no special feelings towards, a person who serves you at a shop.*
- *Hostile people - and others you are currently having difficulty with.*

Phramaha Prasarn Pasano

# Karaniya Metta Sutta

## *Preparation for Loving Kindness*

This Sutta is a meditation on radiating loving-kindness to every sentient being. By doing so, one can overcome any disturbances, find peace and happiness for themselves, and help others to live peacefully by practising this great virtue.

The Karanīya Metta Sutta explains that a group of monks went to the jungle to meditate, but were disturbed and frightened by non-human beings. Unable to progress with their spiritual development, they decided to report the matter to the Buddha. The Buddha then taught the Karanīya Metta Sutta to the group of monks for the pacification of non-human beings and advised them to return to the same place, armed with the sword of Metta (Loving-Kindness) for their protection.

The monks returned to the jungle and radiated their loving-kindness to those beings, and thereafter continued their meditation without any hindrance. These same non-human beings who had earlier caused disturbances later repented and paid their respects to the monks.

Karanīya mattha kusalena Yantam santam padam abhisamecca

*He who is skilled in doing good, and who wishes to attain that state of calm ( Nibbana), should act thus.*

Sakko ujū ca sūjū ca - Suvaco cassa mudu anatimāni

*He should be able, upright, perfectly upright, obedient, gentle, and humble.*

Santussako ca subharo ca - Appa-kicco ca sallahuka-vutti

*Contented, easily supportable, with few duties, simple in livelihood.*

Santindriyo ca nipako ca - Appa-gabbho kulesu ananu giddho.  
*Controlled in senses, discreet, not impudent;  
not greedily attached to families.*

Naca khuddham samācare kiñci - Yena viññū pare upavadeyyum  
*He should not commit any slight wrong so  
that men might find fault in him.*

Sukhino vā khemino hontu - Sabbe sattā bhavantu sukhi-tattā.  
*May all beings, without exception, be happy  
and safe.*

Ye keci pāna bhūtatthi - Tasāvā thāvarā vā anava sesā  
*Whatsoever living beings that exist, without  
exception, weak or strong.*

Dīghā vā ye mahantā vā - Majjhimā-rassa-kānuka thūlā.  
*Long, stout, medium, short, small, or large.*

Ditthā vā yeva additthā - Ye ca dūre vasanti avidūre  
*Those seen (visible) or unseen (not visible),  
and those dwelling far or near.*

Bhūtā vā sambhavesī vā - Sabbe sattā bhavantu sukhi-tattā  
*Those who are born and those who are to  
be born. May all beings, without exception, be  
happy-minded.*

Na paro param nikubbetha - Nāti-maññetha katthaci nam kañci  
*Let no one deceive another nor despise  
anyone anywhere.*

Byāro-sanā patigha-saññā - Nāñña-maññassa dukkha-  
miccheyya.  
*In anger or ill will, let them not wish each  
other harm.*

Mātā yathā niyam puttam - Āyusā ekaputta-manu rakkhe  
*Just as a mother would protect her only child  
at the risk of her own life.*

Evam'pi sabba bhūtesu - Mānasam-bhāvaye apari-mānam  
*Even so, towards all beings let him cultivate  
boundless love.*

Mettanca sabba lōkasmin - Mānasam-bhāvaye apari-mānam  
*Let thoughts of boundless love pervade the  
whole world; above, below, and across.*

Uddham adhō ca tiriyañca - Asam-bādham averam asapattam.  
*Without any obstruction, without any hatred,  
without any enmity.*

Tittham caram nisinno vā - Sayāno vā yāva tassa vigata middho  
*Whether he stands, walks, sits, or lies down,  
as long as he is awake.*

Etam satim adhitthheyya - Brahma metam vihāram idha-māhu  
*He should develop this mindfulness. This,  
they say, is the Highest conduct here.*

Ditthiñ ca anupa gamma sīlavā - Dassa-nena sampanno  
*Not falling into wrong views, virtuous and  
endowed with insight.*

Kāmesu vineyya gedham - Na hi jātu gabbha seyyam  
punareti'ti.  
*He discards attachment to sensuous desires.  
Truly, he does not come again; to beconceived  
in a womb.*

Etena sacca vajjena - Dukkā vūpa samentu me/te.

*By the firm determination of this Truth, may  
I/you (we) be free from suffering!*

Etena sacca vajjena - Bhaya vūpa samentu me/te.

*By the firm determination of this Truth, may  
I/you (we) be free from fear!*

Etena sacca vajjena - Roga vūpa samentu me/te.

*By the firm determination of this Truth, may  
I/you (We) be free from illness!*

## Mettanisamsa Sutta

*Discourse on the Advantages of Loving-Kindness*

Evam me sutam

*Thus have I heard.*

Ekam samayam Bhagavā

*On one occasion, the Blessed One.*

Sāvattthiyam viharati Jetavane Anāthapindikassa ārāme.

*Was residing at the monastery of  
Anathapindika at Jeta Grove, near Savatthi.*

Tatra kho, Bhagavā bhikkhū āmantesi Bhikkhavo ti

*Then the Blessed One addressed the monks,  
saying: “Monks.”*

Bhadante ti te bhikkhū Bhagavato paccassosum.

*“Venerable Sir,” replied those monks in  
assent to the Blessed One.*

Bhagavā etadavoca:

*Thereupon, he said.*

Mettāya bhikkhave, ceto-vimuttiyā

*“Monks, from the deliverance of the heart  
through the cultivation of loving-kindness.*

Asevitāya bhāvitāya bahulīkatāya

*By familiarizing oneself with thoughts of  
loving-kindness.*

Yānīkatāya, vatthukatāya, anutthitāya

*By constantly increasing these thoughts,  
regarding loving-kindness as a vehicle of  
expression and as something to be treasured.*

Paricitāya susamāradhāya

*By living in conformity with these thoughts,  
by putting these ideas into practice, and by  
establishing them.*

Ekādasā-nisamsā pātikankhā.

*Eleven advantages are to be expected.*

Katame ekādasa?

*What are the eleven?"*

Sukham supati.

*He sleeps happily.*

Sukham patibujjhati.

*He wakes up happily.*

Na pāpakam supinam passati.

*He has no bad dreams.*

Manussānam piyo hoti.

*He is dear to human beings.*

Amanussānam piyo hoti.

*He is dear to non-humans.*

Devatā rakkhanti.

*Devas protect him.*

Nāssa aggi vā, visam vā, satham vā kamati.

*He is immune to fire, poison, and sword.*

Tuvatam cittam samādhīyati.

*His mind can concentrate quickly.*

Mukhavanno vipassīdati.

*His facial expression is beautiful, clear, and  
bright.*

Asammūlho kālam karoti.

*He will have a peaceful death.*

Uttarim appati-vijjhanto brahma-lokūpago hoti

*If he fails to attain Arahantship, here and now, he will be reborn in the blissful realm or the Brahma realm.*

Mettāya bhikkhave ceto-vimuttiyā

*“Monks, from the deliverance of heart through the cultivation of loving-kindness,*

Asevitāya, bhāvitāya, bahulīkatāya

*By familiarizing oneself with thoughts of loving-kindness,*

Yānīkatāya vatthukatāya anutthitāya

*By constantly increasing these thoughts, by regarding loving-kindnesses as a vehicle of expression, and also as something to be treasured,*

Paricitāya susa-māraddhāya

*By living in conformity with these thoughts, by putting these ideas into practice, and by establishing them,*

Ime ekādasā-nīsamsā pātikankhā’ti.

*These eleven advantages, monks, are to be expected.”*

Idamavoca Bhagavā attamanā te bhikkhū.

*So said the Blessed One.*

Bhagavato bhāsitam abhinandun’ti.

*The monks rejoiced at the words of the Blessed One.*

# Mettanussati Sutta

## *Meditation on Loving Kindness*

Attupamāya sabbesam - Sattānam sukha kāmataṃ

*Having compared oneself with others, one  
should practise loving-kindness.*

Passitvā kamato mettā - Sabba sattesu bhāvaye.

*Towards all beings by realising that everyone  
desires happiness.*

Sukhī bhavēyyaṃ niddukkho - Ahaṃ niccaṃ ahaṃ viya

*May I be free from sorrow and always be  
happy. May those who desire my welfare,*

Hitā ca me sukhī hontu - Majjhataṃ tha ca verina.

*Those who are indifferent towards me and  
those who hate me, also be happy.*

Imaṃhi gāmakkhettāmi - Sattā hontu sukhī sadā

*May all beings who live in this vicinity  
always be happy.*

Tato paraṃ ca rajjesu - Cakkavālesu jantuno.

*So also those who live in other kingdoms in  
this world-system be happy.*

Samantā cakkā vālesu - Sattānaṃ tesu pāṇiṇo

*May all beings living in every world-system  
and each element of life.*

Sukhino puggalā bhutā - Atta bhāva gatā siyuma.

*Within such a system, be happy and achieve  
the highest bliss.*

Tathā itthi pumā ceva - Ariyā anariyā pi ca

*Likewise, women, men, the noble and the ignoble ones,*

Devā narā apāyatthā - Tathā dasa disāsu cā ti.

*Gods, and those in woeful states, and those living in the ten directions*

## Shareing the Merit of Loving Kindness

At the end of a meditation retreat, it is customary to share merit and loving-kindness with all beings so everyone benefits from your meditation practice. You can do this after your regular morning or evening meditation as well. Say whatever words seem suitable to you, such as:

*May I share the benefit of my Vipassana practice with all beings, so they may be free of mental and physical suffering, may all beings be well and happy.*

# Doorway Two

## Breathing and Meditational Postures

*Essay by*

*Phramah Yongyuth Thiradhamma*

*“God breathed life into mankind. We have been told that the  
Breath of Life only happened once.”*

## Types of Meditation

The Buddha taught many different types of meditation, each designed to overcome a particular problem or to develop a particular psychological state. But the two most common and useful types of meditation are Mindfulness of Breathing (anapana sati) and Loving Kindness Meditation (metta bhavana). But actually, if we categorize meditation by purpose, there are two: Samatha and Vipassana. Samatha Meditation focuses on one-pointedness of mind or calmness, and tranquility, while Vipassana Meditation focuses on mindfulness or seeing things as they really are (yathabhutam). However, both are interdependent or interconnected.

One would follow these easy steps: Place, Posture, Practice, and Problems.

- *Place - find a suitable place, perhaps a room that is not too noisy and where you are not likely to be disturbed.*
- *Posture - sit in a comfortable posture. A good posture is to sit with your legs folded, a pillow under your buttocks, your back straight, your hands in your lap, and your eyes closed. Alternatively, you can sit in a chair as long as you keep your back straight.*
- *Practice: as you sit quietly with your eyes closed, focus on the in-and-out movement of the breath. This can be done by counting the breaths or watching the rise and fall of the abdomen.*
- *Problems - certain conditions and difficulties will arise. You might experience irritating body itches or discomfort in the knees. If this happens, try to keep the body relaxed without moving and keep focusing on the breath.*

You will likely have many intrusive thoughts, distracting you from the breath. The only way you can deal with this problem is to keep returning your attention to the breath patiently. If you keep doing this, eventually your thoughts will weaken, your concentration will grow stronger, and you will have moments of deep mental calm and inner peace.

It is good to meditate for 15 minutes every day for a week, then increase the time by 5 minutes each week until you reach 45 minutes. After a few weeks of daily meditation, you will start to notice that your concentration improves, you have fewer thoughts, and you experience moments of real peace and stillness.

A Master, when asked how long one should meditate, said, “Half an hour is enough unless you are very busy, then it takes an hour.”

Remember, a child needs help from parents or caretakers; similarly, a beginner meditator needs a teacher. While a teacher is not absolutely necessary, personal guidance from someone who is familiar with meditation is certainly helpful. Unfortunately, some monks and laypeople set themselves up as meditation teachers when they don't know what they are doing. Try to pick a teacher with a good reputation, a balanced personality, and who adheres closely to the Buddha's teachings.

Meditation is widely accepted and used by psychiatrists and psychologists today. Meditation is now known to have a highly therapeutic effect upon the mind and is used by many professional mental health workers to help induce relaxation, overcome phobias, and bring about self-awareness. The Buddha's insights into the human mind are helping people as much today as they did in ancient times.

Many things in our lives are beyond our control. We live our lives with the future and the past. Rarely do we live our lives in the present moment. That's why we suffer because we

expect never to get what we think we deserve, even when we experience things that are unpleasant or unhappy to us, and we lose what we love, which causes suffering. However, it is possible to take responsibility for our own states of mind - and to change them for the better.

According to Buddhism, we should take responsibility for our lives; this is the most important thing we can do. It teaches that it is the only real antidote to our personal sorrows, and to the anxieties, fears, hatreds, and general confusions or distractions that beset the human condition.

Meditation is a means of transforming the mind. Buddhist meditation practices are techniques that encourage and develop concentration and mindfulness to help cultivate our inner wisdom. By engaging with a particular meditation practice, you will learn the patterns and habits of your mind, and it offers a means to cultivate new, more positive ways of being. With regular practice and patience, these nourishing, focused states of mind can deepen into profoundly peaceful and energized states. Such experiences can be transformative, leading to a new understanding of life.

Over the millennia, countless meditation techniques have been developed in the Buddhist tradition. All of them may be described as ‘mind-training’, but they take many different approaches. The foundation of all of them, however, is the cultivation of a calm and positive state of mind, and it is mindfulness.

Each year, thousands of people from the West and the East learn meditation with their own Buddhist Community. This center teaches two basic meditations that the historical Buddha originally taught. These help develop,

- *The qualities of calmness and emotional positivity.*
- *The Mindfulness of Breathing and also Loving-Kindness (Metta Bhavana) meditation.*

The techniques of meditation are very simple. However, reading about them is not enough; you are requested to learn from an experienced and reliable master. A master will be able to offer you guidance or a framework on how to apply the technique and how to deal with difficulties during practice. Perhaps most importantly, a master as Kalyanamitra (a spiritual guide or companion) can offer the encouragement and inspiration of their own example.

You need not be interested in Buddhism or religion, but if you want to take this spiritual journey. As we may know, people with different backgrounds and motives for learning meditation vary. Some want to improve their concentration for work, study, or even sports; others seek relief from stress and peace of mind; others try to answer fundamental questions about life. With regular practice, meditation can help all of us to find what we are looking for.

Meditation courses are excellent contexts for learning. Meditation Retreats offer ideal conditions to take things further. If you would like to continue your meditation journey in Thailand or Southeast Asia, you are also free to inquire about that.

## Sitting Meditation

The most popular posture among meditators is sitting. Sitting seems to be a symbolic form of meditation alongside eye-closing. Sitting and eye-closing cannot be separated. For beginning meditators, always think about sitting and closing your eyes. Also, sitting is a very basic posture that everyone can do. People can meditate in a sitting posture for a very long time.

Initially, to sit in meditation, set up your posture in a relaxed yet upright position, usually sitting on a cushion and probably cross-legged. If this is not easy, you can sit on the

floor in a kneeling position or in a chair. Then you close your eyes, relax, and tune in to how you are feeling. It is important to be sensitive to your experience because this is what you work with in meditation. It is a good idea to take some time to sit quietly before starting a meditation, to slow down and relax.

The first thing to learn in meditation is how to sit effectively. There are two important principles to keep in mind when setting up a suitable posture for meditation.

- *Your posture should allow you to relax and feel comfortable.*
- *Your posture has to allow you to remain alert and aware.*

Both of these are vitally important. If you're uncomfortable, you won't be able to meditate. If you can't relax, then you won't be able to enjoy the meditation practice and, just as importantly, you won't be able to let go of the underlying emotional conflicts that cause your physical tension.

Suppose you've ever been to a Hatha yoga class that ends with shavasana, where people lie on the floor and relax. When you choose this meditational posture, your mind may wander in an undisciplined manner without a competent teacher. The best way to effectively combine relaxation and awareness is a sitting posture. You don't have to sit cross-legged or even sit on the floor.

We'll explain how to set up an effective posture in three positions: sitting in a chair, sitting astride a cushion or on a stool, and sitting cross-legged. All of these are effective. The important thing is to find one that makes you comfortable. Remember, you may think it looks accomplished to sit cross-legged, but if you don't have the flexibility it takes, you'll simply suffer! Make it easy on yourself. Choose a posture that

is right for you.

There are many different ways to sit for meditation, including using chairs, sitting on a cushion astride, using a bench, and various cross-legged positions, from the simple half-lotus to the full lotus. I'm going to stress again that you need to find a position that is comfortable for you. Listen to your body. Discomfort will distract you from your meditation and is also your body's way of telling you that something is wrong.

These are the conditions you have to bear in mind when setting up a posture that allows you to be comfortable and aware. Your spine should be upright, following its natural tendency to be slightly hollowed. You should neither be slumped nor have an exaggerated hollow in your lower spine,

- *Your spine should be relaxed.*
- *Your shoulders should be relaxed, and slightly rolled back and down.*
- *Your hands should be supported, either resting on a cushion or on your lap, so that your arms are relaxed. Your head should be balanced evenly, with your chin slightly tucked in. The back of your neck should be relaxed, long, and open.*
- *Your face should be relaxed, with your brow smooth, your eyes relaxed, your jaw relaxed, and your tongue relaxed and just touching the back of your teeth.*

Next, we'll look at the most common ways you can sit, starting with the easiest, and then at some common posture faults and how to correct them.

To start with, the easier postures first. One thing for the beginning meditators is a desire to contort themselves into a posture that is too hard on them. This results in discomfort,

distracted meditations, and even physical damage. Be kind to yourself. You can meditate perfectly well in an ordinary dining room or office chair. The only thing you have to do to modify the chair is raise its back legs by about an inch (2.0 to 2.5cm). This allows you to sit upright without having to either hold your back rigidly or lean against the chair back. Blocks of wood, or even telephone directories, can be used for this. When meditating, the very base of the spine touches the back of the chair. It's best not to lean back in the chair—Rest your hands on your thighs, palms down. Have your feet flat on the floor if you can. If your legs are very long or very short compared to the chair, then this might not be possible. If your feet don't reach the floor, you can use another surface to rest them on. If your legs are too long, you should ideally find another chair. Some office chairs are perfect for meditating! Set the seat slightly forward and make sure the backrest makes only very slight contact with your lower back. Adjust the height so that your feet are flat on the floor. There are also specialist meditation chairs available to help you sit comfortably in an appropriate posture.

Although you can use a chair to meditate on, for some people, it's not as satisfying as sitting on the floor. Somehow, being on the floor gives a more grounded feeling. Finding good cushions is important. They need to be really firm, and most pillows just compress too much and don't provide enough support. The same goes for most ordinary, household cushions. This meditator is using cushions (called zafus) specifically designed for meditation. He's kneeling with them between his legs. Most people who sit astride cushions need two or three, depending on the height required.

The important thing is to get the right height. If you sit too low, you'll end up slumping. Slumping can interfere with your ability to stay aware and lead to discomfort. If you sit too high,

then you will have too much of a hollow in your back, which can lead to pinching. When your back is relatively upright, without you having to use any effort to keep it that way, then you've got the height about right.

Not everyone can sit cross-legged. There's no need to be in a cross-legged posture to meditate. In fact, if you force yourself into an uncomfortable cross-legged posture, then you may do long-term damage to your joints, and you certainly won't be comfortable enough to meditate effectively. However, if you have the flexibility, then sitting cross-legged is a very stable and grounded posture. There are several ways to sit with crossed legs.

The half lotus is the simplest cross-legged position. It's also probably the most common cross-legged posture. You need to keep both knees on the ground to provide adequate support. Having three points of contact (your butt and both knees) gives you a lot of stability. When was the last time you saw a photographer trying to keep a camera stable on a dipod? If you can't quite get both knees on the floor, you can use some padding (a thin cushion or a folded scarf) under your knees to keep you stable. If one or both of your knees is more than an inch (2-3cm) off the ground, use a chair or try sitting astride cushions, a meditation bench, or a stool.

You can always do some yoga to loosen your hips, then come back later and try a cross-legged posture. Again, if your hands don't rest naturally in your lap, keep them supported, perhaps on a cushion or blanket. You might want to alternate which foot is in front from time to time. This is a good thing to do because any cross-legged posture is slightly asymmetrical. If you alternate the positions of your feet, you'll even out the imbalances and not "build them in" your posture.

These postures are only suitable for very flexible people. I have a friend who had to have the cartilage removed from

his knees after years of forcing himself into lotus. If you feel any pain in your knees or if this posture becomes very uncomfortable, try one of the earlier postures we looked at. In the full lotus, the feet rest on the opposite thighs, with the soles pointing upwards (if you have pain in your ankles, stop and find an easier posture). In the half-lotus, one foot is on the opposite thigh with the sole pointing upwards, while the other rests on the floor, as in the half-lotus. The full lotus is said to be the best position for meditating. The meditator who can sit comfortably in full lotus is close to the ground, which seems to help them feel grounded, and is also in a very balanced, symmetrical posture. Sitting in a chair or kneeling on cushions or on a bench is a more symmetrical posture, but there's less contact with the floor.

A slumped posture does not allow us to remain alert and aware while meditating. When you slump, you may also experience tension in the neck and shoulders. Look at how the back of the neck is short and compressed, rather than long and open. There are three causes of slumping,

- *Sitting too low*
- *Having insufficient tilt in your seat*
- *Habitual slumping*

When you sit too low, this tilts the pelvis backwards, so the upper back has to slump forward to stay in balance. This has the effect of closing the chest and reducing your ability to breathe freely. If you sit in this posture, you'll tend to feel rather dull and may even fall asleep because of the constriction in your chest.

Having your seat at the right height but with a flat or insufficiently tilted seat is also a cause of slumping. And sometimes slumping is just a habit. After we've had a look at the overarching, we'll look more closely at how to deal

with slumping. But what we most often do is to try to hold ourselves upright by force of will. This can result in a posture that “looks” okay. If you slump and then force yourself to sit upright, your posture might look okay from the outside, but before long, those clenched muscles will start to feel pretty painful from the inside. Over-arching can result from,

- *Sitting too high*
- *Having too much of a slope on your seat*
- *Habitual over-arching*

As a result, the pelvis tilts forward. To avoid falling flat on his face, the meditator leans back, creating an exaggerated hollow in the lower back. There should be a normal, gentle hollowing in the lumbar region (the lordotic curve), but exaggerating it can cause a painful “pinching” in the lower back. Over-arching can also occur when the seat angle is too steep (which also throws the weight forward, so the meditator has to lean back, causing excessive hollowing). And over-arching can also be a simple postural habit. The solution for over-arching is generally to adjust the seat angle, or, more commonly, to find a lower seat, or to adjust the angle of the pelvis.

To avoid either slumping or overarching, you need to get the height of your stool or cushion right. But how do you know when you’ve found the correct height for you? There is no one right height that suits everyone. Your own body height and flexibility will have a big effect on the height that is right for you.

The best way to find the right height is to have an experienced person on hand to adjust your posture and give you feedback. It’s very hard to judge from the inside whether your posture needs to be changed. But here are some checks you can carry out yourself to see whether you are sitting too

high or too low,

- *Set up your posture, and make sure you are comfortable and relaxed.*
- *Make sure you aren't holding yourself in a way that feels forced, even if you think it's a "good" posture.*
- *How does it feel?*
- *When you relax, do you find that you slump?*
- *Take your hands around to the back of your lumbar spine.*
- *Is the lordotic curve exaggerated (over-arching)?*
- *Or is your lower back flattened or even convex (slumping)?*
- *Or do you have a normal lordotic curve when in a relaxed position (good posture)?*

If your seat (whether it's a chair or a bench) is flat, you'll slump, with all the problems that follow. Your seat should have a slight forward angle to let you sit upright with no effort. As explained earlier, you can achieve a good angle when sitting on a chair by having a 1" (2- 2.5cm) block under each of the back legs.

This principle still applies when sitting on cushions. If you sit towards the back of your cushion, your pelvis will tilt backwards, and you will end up slumping. To give your cushion a slight forward tilt, place your weight toward the front of the cushion. If your chair or stool is too steeply angled, however, then this will tend to throw your weight forward and cause over-arching.

It's ideal if you can actually try out a stool for a while. Once you've done a few 30-minute meditations on a stool, you have a good idea whether it's right for you. An excellent solution to find the right angle in your seat is a meditation

stool with rounded legs, as illustrated below, available through our online meditation supplies store. When you sit on such a stool, it automatically adjusts to the right angle for your body size, though you may still need to play around with cushions between your bottom and the stool to get the right height.

A lot of slumping and over-arching results from holding the pelvis at the wrong angle. So some slumping and over-arching can be corrected quite simply by changing your posture. Again, it's best to have an experienced meditation teacher check your posture, but if you can't, there are some self-tests you can do.

Slip your hand under your buttocks. Two little bones protrude downwards through your buttocks. We meditation teachers have a technical term for them: we call them the "sitting bones". There's probably a more anatomically correct term, but we get by calling them sitting bones. If the top of your pelvis tilts forward (causing your back to over-arch), then the sitting bones slide off the back of your hands. If you tilt your pelvis backward (causing your back to slump), the sitting bones slide off the front of your hands. When your pelvis is perfectly aligned, the sitting bones point straight down into your hands, or into your seat once you've removed your hands.

So, what you want is for those sitting bones to point straight down while your back is relaxed and at ease. This can be achieved when you have your seat at the right height for you, so play around with different cushion heights, and see when your back is relaxed, and your sitting bones are pointing straight down. Another check is to repeat the exercise of tilting your pelvis back and forwards, but put your hands on the small of your back, noticing how it slumps when you tilt your pelvis back, and over-arches when you tilt your pelvis forward. When your sitting bones are pointing straight down,

and you have the right height and angle of the seat, the small of your back should have a gentle hollow, which is perfectly comfortable.

Your arms weigh a lot. If your hands are not supported, then your shoulders have to carry all of that weight. That means either that your shoulders will tense to bear the weight of your arms, or your shoulder muscles will be overstretched. Either way, it's going to be uncomfortable. Make sure your hands are supported. If you're in a low cross-legged position, then you may be able to rest your hands comfortably in your lap. However, you may want to have your hands supported higher. This will allow your shoulders to roll back further and relax more. If you're sitting in a chair, you can usually rest your hands on your thighs, but some people with long backs may need something to support their hands. If you're kneeling, using cushions or a stool, you may need substantial support for your hands. In this case, another meditation cushion, a sweater, or a blanket tied around the waist can be used.

Many people wonder whether the eyes should be open or closed during meditation, and different Buddhist meditation traditions vary in their approach to this point. In the mindfulness of breathing and metta bhavana practices taught here, I would recommend keeping the eyes closed. This allows for greater one-pointedness of mind. The exception to this is when you find you are tired, when the eyes can be opened to provide more stimulation. The eyes should be lightly closed, with the surrounding muscles as relaxed and soft as possible. Even though the eyes are closed, you can think of having an "unfocused gaze." This soft, unfocused state is more conducive to relaxation and mental calmness.

The position of your head is very important. Your head should be balanced and should almost seem to float effortlessly on top of your spine. You can imagine the crown of your

head being drawn upwards, as if the string of a balloon were attached to it. Your chin should be slightly tucked in, and the back of your neck should be long and relaxed. So, as you tuck in your chin, feel the muscles on the back of your neck relaxing and lengthening. If your chin is tucked in too far, so that your head hangs forward, then you'll find either that you tend to feel dull and sleepy, or that you become caught up in circular, and often not very positive, loops of emotions. If your head is tilted too far back, so that your chin is in the air, you'll find that you tend to get caught up in thinking, and that you become rather "speedy." But when your chin is nicely tucked in, you're able to be aware of both your thoughts and emotions without getting lost in them.

To create good conditions for awareness, you need an open chest with a sense of spaciousness across the front of your chest between your shoulders. You can encourage this sense of spaciousness by taking a few deep breaths and filling your upper chest. As you breathe in, the front of your body will rise. Feel the openness across the front of your upper chest and, at the same time, relax your shoulders, letting them fall and roll back. If, while sitting, you feel any stretching in your shoulders, it probably means you need to have your hands supported higher. While meditating, you may feel your shoulders rising and falling as you breathe in and out. If you tune into the sensation of your shoulders falling on the outbreath, you can encourage them to relax even more deeply.

- *Adjust your cushion height so that your back is relatively straight and also relaxed.*
- *Make sure that your hands are supported.*
- *Relax your shoulders, letting them roll back to open your chest.*
- *Adjust the angle of your head so that the back of your neck is relaxed, long, and open, and your chin*

*is slightly tucked in.*

You're now ready to begin working on body awareness and relaxation.

## Body Awareness and Relaxation

Being aware of your body in meditation is vital. It's not something separate from the meditation, and is not an optional extra. It's an integral part of the process of meditating, and it's necessary to spend some time setting up your posture and taking your awareness through your body if you want to meditate well. The more awareness that you can take into your body as you begin your meditation, the better your meditation will go. Otherwise, it's a bit like trying to bake a cake without bothering to mix the ingredients first or to check that the oven is warm enough.

After you have set up your posture, you can take your awareness through your body.

Start by becoming aware of your feet and the contact you have with the floor. Really let your awareness fill your feet. The more you become aware of your feet, the more you can allow them to relax. Let the muscles soften and lengthen. Once you've done that for a minute or two, take your awareness from your feet through the rest of your body, "letting go" as you move through each muscle. Become aware of your legs, thighs, hips, back, shoulders, arms and hands, neck, head, and face. When you become aware of a particular area of your body, then soften, relax, and let go. Notice the subtle change in the quality of your experience as you first become aware, and then relax. Often, you'll notice more energy, tingling, or even pleasure as your body relaxes. Pay particular attention to the following parts of your body, where lots of tension is commonly stored,

- *The back of your neck*
- *Your shoulders*
- *Your hips*
- *Your thighs and calves*

Once you've been through your body, become aware of your body as a whole. Then center your awareness on your belly, sensing the calming, rhythmic motion of your belly as you breathe in and out. Relax, soften, let go. Now you're ready to begin meditating.