

Doing the Sequence

Step 1: Sitting and Breathing

Getting Situated: Begin by coming into a comfortable cross-legged sitting position. If you are not comfortable in this position, if you are unable to sit up tall, or if your knees are higher than your hips, sit on a bolster, yoga block, or a stack of firmly folded blankets with your ankles and feet still on the floor (it's important to have a firm foundation). If you are still unable to sit comfortably tall, turn to the Chair Yoga Sleep Sequences in chapter 9.

Tuning In: Let your eyes rest lightly closed, or, alternatively, softly focus your gaze on a point nearby. While sitting comfortably tall, bring your awareness to your breathing. At first simply notice it, feel it, be with it. Sense the breath flowing in and out, and with it sense how your body is moving. Notice if you are doing anything that affects how the breath is flowing. With the completion of each inhalation and exhalation, notice the slight pause, a momentary suspension, in the movement of the breath (when filled with breath the pause is called *antara kumbhaka*; when empty of breath it is called *bahya kumbhaka*). Always allow those natural pauses to happen, as they are signs and sources of being more present and calm. Allow the breath to flow as freely and easily as you can for about one to two minutes.

Ujjayi Pranayama: Changing as little as possible in your comfort and the flow of the breath, open your mouth and breathe out as though you are trying to breathe fog onto a glass or mirror. In doing so, sense the breath in your throat and how when it flows over your vocal cords it gives the breath a light whisper-like sound. Maintain this sound and sensation of the breath in your throat as you draw the breath in. Do this for three cycles of breath. Now keep breathing with this sound and sensation but

with your mouth closed, using the sensations of the breath to make it smoother and simpler. Breathe with this ujjayi—uplifting—technique when doing any yoga posture, including when transitioning in and out of the postures.

Sama and Visama Vrtti Pranayama: In *sama* and *visama vritti* breathing, make the pace and duration of the breath equal (*sama*) or unequal (*visama*) as it flows (*vritti*). Start with *sama vritti*, with an ujjayi quality. Cultivate the breath by making your breathing as steady and calm, yet as spacious as you can comfortably sustain (*sthira sukham pranayama*). Whenever doing yoga postures, try to establish *sama vritti* with ujjayi as the default. Then, to more deeply relax and release tension, explore stretching the length of each exhalation by a count of one or two, thus breathing with unequal fluctuation (*visama vritti*). In stretching the length of the exhalation, do so only so much that the following inhalation does not rush in and such that there is no other disturbance to *sthira sukham pranayama*.

Breathe in this way for three to five minutes. With each inhalation, enjoy the simple and light ways your body naturally expands. Allow the natural pause that happens when filled with breath. With the breath flowing out, sense the natural ways your body settles, especially as you stretch the length of the exhalations a little more. As this settling happens, allow your body to relax a little more deeply. With every inhalation, feel where you sense tension in your body or your thoughts. With every exhalation, let go.

In preparation for step 2, shake out your legs and point and flex your feet to take tension out of your knees and hips that may have developed while sitting for several minutes. Keep doing ujjayi pranayama with *visama vritti pranayama* throughout the next step of this sequence.

Step 2: Basic Postural Sequence for Sleep

Simple Cross-Legged Sitting



Special Sensitivity: Knees, low back, neck

Props: Small bolster (or a yoga block or folded blankets), large bolster(s)

Doing the Pose: Come back to sitting comfortably tall. In doing so, try to bring your weight more to the front of your sitting bones, then actively press down through your sitting bones (the bones you feel that you are sitting on). If necessary, sit on a prop to get into, and sustain, this position. If you feel pressure in your inner knees, place folded blankets or blocks under them. Sitting upright, slightly lift your shoulders, draw them slightly back, then let your shoulder blades release down your back. Position your head in a way that feels as if it's effortlessly floating on top of your head.

Simple Cross-Legged Forward Fold

Special Sensitivity: Knees, low back, neck

Props: Small bolster (or a yoga block or folded blankets), large bolster(s)

Doing the Pose: Start by sitting comfortably tall. In doing so, try to actively press down through your sitting bones, and try to rotate your pelvis to where you feel your weight more to the front of your sitting bones. If necessary, sit on a prop the same way you did in step 1 to get into, and sustain, this position. Place the large bolster in front of you. Come back to ujjayi pranayama with visama vritti pranayama. With each inhalation, consciously extend up taller through your spine. Maintaining that extension while exhaling, slowly release the breath, giving more weight to your sitting bones with the completion of each exhalation. While staying with the connection of breath-to-extension and breath-to-grounding, try to rotate your pelvis forward without rounding

your low back, bringing your arms and torso forward over the large bolster(s). Position your torso as far forward as you comfortably can while keeping your sitting bones grounded. Be sensitive to your knees, low back, and neck. With your chest resting on the bolster, drape your arms on the floor and allow your body to simply relax. Explore using the breath for deep relaxation, staying with ujjayi pranayama with visama vritti pranayama. Let the sound of ujjayi soothe your nerves, and let the elongated exhalations take away tension. Stay in this posture for three to five minutes. Sensitive to your low back, very slowly rise, extend and shake out your legs, and quietly transition to the next posture.

Peaceful Resting Pose



Special Sensitivity: Knees, low back, neck

Props: One or two bolsters (or a stack of folded blankets)

Doing the Pose: Place your bolster(s) and/or blankets on the floor to the right side of your yoga mat. Sit up tall with both legs stretched out in front of you, then bend your knees to slide your feet in about halfway to your hips, with your feet and knees separated about the width of your mat. Keeping your knees bent to about ninety degrees, release both knees to the right while

turning your torso to the right and placing your torso and head on the bolsters. If there is pressure in your low back, sit on higher bolsters. If there is discomfort in your neck, prop up your chest slightly higher and then play with the positioning of your head. (For less tension in your neck, look the same direction your knees are pointed.) Drape your arms on the floor. Staying with ujjayi pranayama with visama vrtti pranayama, allow your body to relax. Let the sound of ujjayi soothe your nerves, and let the elongated exhalations take away tension. Sensitive to your neck, low back, and knees, very slowly rise, extend and shake out your legs, and quietly transition to the other side of this posture. Stay in this posture for three to five minutes on each side.

Child's Pose



Special Sensitivity: Knees, low back, neck, shins, ankles, feet

Props: Blankets or bolsters, block

Doing the Pose: Come onto your hands and knees (all fours) with a large bolster placed between your knees. Slowly release your hips back toward or to your heels. If this causes tension in your

shins, ankles, or feet, place a folded blanket (or several) under your shins, with your feet dangling off the edge. If you feel tension in your knees or low back, play with bringing your knees wider apart, which allows an easier release through the hips, thereby easing pressure in the lower back and the knees. Also play with elevating your hips onto a block or bolster to reduce pressure in your knees. Sensitive to your low back, bring your torso forward to relax your belly, chest, and head onto the bolster. The bolster should be sufficiently high such that there is no added pressure in your low back. Drape your arms on the floor along the sides of your legs, or, alternatively, bring your arms to the floor overhead. If there is discomfort in your neck, prop up your chest slightly higher and then play with the positioning of your head. Among the most relaxing postures, Child's Pose is a place of rest and inner calm. Stay with ujjayi pranayama with visama vritti pranayama while completely letting go and relaxing deep inside. Stay in this posture for three to five minutes.

Sunset Pose³



Special Sensitivity: Low back, hamstrings, neck

Props: Blankets or bolsters, block

Doing the Pose: Sit up tall with both legs stretched out in front of you. In doing so, try to actively press down through your sitting bones and try to rotate your pelvis to where you feel your weight more to the front of your sitting bones. If necessary, sit on a prop the same way you did in step 1 to get into, and sustain, this position. Place a large bolster in front of you between your legs (or on them). Try to rotate your pelvis forward (as though bringing your belly up and forward toward your knees) to bring your torso forward to rest over the bolster. Have the bolster sufficiently high such that there is no pressure in your low back, and so that your chest and forehead are fully supported (explore adding a thin cushion or pad to support your head). Stay in this posture for three to five minutes. Very slowly rise, with sensitivity to your low back. Gently twist your spine to the right for about five breaths and then to the left for about five breaths.

Legs Up the Wall Pose⁴



Special Sensitivity: Hamstrings, low back

Props: Bolster or blankets, strap, sandbag

Doing the Pose: Place a bolster or folded blanket next to a wall. Sitting sideways next to the wall, shift your hips up onto the bolster, then slowly recline onto your back while swiveling your hips toward the wall and extending your legs up the wall. If tight hamstrings do not allow your legs to extend up with your buttocks touching the wall, elevate the prop or slide your hips out away from the wall. Let your palms rest on your belly and heart, or drape your arms on the floor, palms turned up. Your legs can be held together with a strap, and a sandbag can be placed on the feet for stability and to reduce tension in your low back. Rest here for five to ten minutes, letting go of tension breath by breath. Stay with ujjayi pranayama with visama vrtti pranayama. To release, first remove the sandbag and strap. Slide your feet down the wall and gently roll to your side, curling up and nurturing yourself there for a moment. Changing as little as possible, either proceed to step 3, settle into a quiet activity such as reading, or slip into bed and fall asleep.

On Meditation

Many people say they cannot meditate because their mind will not stop chattering. Frustrated, they often give up exploring meditation. This mindset expresses the common misunderstanding that meditating means having no thoughts. Although moving into inner stillness is one of the many fruits of meditation practice, it is not the goal of meditation. In fact, there does not have to be a goal. Much like the postural practice, when we go into meditation with a specific goal in mind, such as a perfectly quiet mind, it is

frustrating, because even the most experienced meditators have only rare moments of complete inner quiet and stillness. Appreciate that the mind thinks; that's what it does. Enjoy it! If, just as with the postural practice, we practice meditation as a process of self-exploration, self-discovery, and self-transformation—a sense of getting to know our mind—we can experience the joy of it the first moment we try.

In meditating, we open the windows of the mind to clearer consciousness. To the extent that we refine the temple of the physical body through consistent postural practices, it gives us more unwavering support in allowing the windows to naturally open. Similarly, consistent pranayama practices wake us up in a way that creates a stronger inner invitation to the currents of clear awareness, leading to a lighter and more balanced sense of being. Yet to meditate, we do not have to wait for some requisite level of asana or pranayama practice; rather, we can meditate without ever having done a single posture.

In setting up for seated meditation, choose a comfortable sitting position. The most important quality in sitting is comfort; over time, alignment of the spine and general release of tension in the body will lead to greater comfort in sitting for longer periods. With practice, you will eventually be able to sit on top of your sitting bones with a neutral pelvis, which allows your spine to be more easily held naturally tall. For some, this requires sitting in a chair, on a high cushion, or against a wall for back support. Over time and with practice (along with a supportive lifestyle and favorable genetics), you may find you are able to sit comfortably in Lotus Pose (Padmasana), the ultimate posture for sitting (although few Westerners, including those with lifelong meditation practices, can sit in this position for extended periods, perhaps because of having grown up sitting in chairs).

Sitting with whatever props it takes to establish and maintain a neutral pelvis, consciously root down into your sitting bones, feeling how that grounding action allows a taller spine, more open heart center, more natural flow of breath, and a sense of your head floating on top of your spine. Exploring this stable and eventually more sustainable position, feel your spine and the crown of your head extending taller as you feel more grounded through your sitting bones, from there allowing the shoulder blades to release down your back, and your chin to release slightly down. The palms can rest together in your lap or on your knees. Further cues are given for each meditation practice.⁵

Step 3: Mindful Breathing Meditation for Settling Your Mind



Before beginning this step, please read the sidebar “On Meditation.” Then, to begin, sit as comfortably as you can, using whatever props it takes (if necessary, sit in a chair or against a wall). Let your eyes rest lightly closed. Feel your contact with

the floor or whatever you are sitting on. Establish more of a sense of grounding your sitting bones, and sit as comfortably tall as you can. Position your head in such a way that feels as if it is effortlessly floating on top of your spine. Let your shoulders relax back and down, away from your neck. Relax your hands into your lap or onto your knees.

Bring your awareness just to the present, to noticing how you are feeling. Notice any tension in your body, in your thoughts, and just acknowledge it to yourself. Free of judgment, simply notice.

Now, bring your awareness to the breath. At first just notice it, feel it. Feel the natural ways your body is moving with the flow of the breath. You might feel it mostly in your belly, in the center of your chest, or at the tip of your nose. Allowing the breath to flow in and out as effortlessly as can be, begin feeling it flowing in and out through your nostrils. Feel it there, and be with it, present just to that sensation.

You may notice various sounds and other sensations. Perhaps you hear a sound from outside the room, or the sensation of the air in the room. Transitory, like the breath, they come and go. Come back to watching the breath, allowing the other sensations to just be there or fade away.

You will notice that your mind is thinking, perhaps wandering around. Let it. Your thoughts, like sounds and the breath, come and go. Let them. Keeping your awareness with the breath, watch it, sensing it flowing in and flowing out. Be with it, present with the breath, present in just this moment.

Staying with it, begin to breathe out a little longer (*visama pranayama*). Let the inhalation happen as effortlessly, lightly, and naturally as you can. With each exhalation, sense tension draining away from your eyes, the space between your temples as though softening, your mouth relaxing. With each exhalation,

let more tension drain away, softening your throat, sensing ease through your neck, your shoulders as relaxed as can be. Breathe by breath, watching the breath, sense your body letting go. Allow yourself to feel more connected to the earth and a sense of being invited into a quiet, still mind and deep sleep.