

March 09

## Tips on the Art of Sitting

These ideas or suggestions assume that you have a seated practice. They are not directed so much as to how to take your seat as with aiding you in more richly finding your seat or of becoming more drawn into your seat.

For better or worse, these suggestions are all taken directly from my own practice, as it has been going lately, although in a few instances I give some credit to others. And what I offer is not in any way intended as encyclopedic (whatever that would be); these are just a handful of tips.

I will, in some instances, assume that you are sitting in a supported Padmasana. But I would expect that my comments could be transferred to other seated postures, although at this point I have not explored several of these myself, for example, supported Virasana or being seated in a chair.

I will arrange these tips in a rather bottom up order, starting with the feet and ending with the eyes. This is in no way to suggest that they should be explored in this order, although the feet and legs are not a bad place to begin. Nor do I intend to intimate that if you are really good you will be able to do everything all at once. You might better think of these ideas as condiments: a little of this, a little of that, and maybe your sitting will be a little tastier.

I will occasionally suggest that certain ideas seem to be to be more difficult to take hold of in the body; these may not be the best place to jump in. But see for yourself. I would also suggest exploring only one or two tips in any sitting. It is generally more instructive (I believe) to return to one idea several times over the course of a sitting, than to jump around too much. You may be surprised to find that a particular release or energetic action does not stay released or energetically active. So here are my suggestions.

### A. Brightening the Feet.

The feet – and so the legs – are a good deal more important to the expansiveness and steadiness of your sitting than you may initially suppose. Think of how you stand on your feet in Tadasana. Now imagine that you lift and spread the toes, and so increase the energetic uplift in the arches. Then

can you recreate this sense in your seated position? Can you (as it were) energetically (if not actually) bring more Tadasana to your feet?

This, by the way, increases the sense that you are drawing your feet and legs underneath you. (You might even imagine that you are actually standing in Tadasana while you sit.) This will help to support your seated posture. It also, not incidentally, will help to keep the feet and legs from going to sleep on you – or at least slowing the onset of this.

### B. Energizing the Arch-to-Heart Channel.

First locate what I will call the three way stations of each arch-to-heart channel. These are located in the soles of the feet, in the back of the knees and in the receding of the groins. Then begin to map the channels, or circuits I'm interested in by imagining that you draw little circles (or ellipses) on the arch of the foot, the inner fold of the knee and the crease of the groins. Then “connect the dots” to get the idea of these circuits by drawing imaginary lines from the arches to the knees to the groins.

This is a start, but it gives us just an inert, two-dimensional picture. To enliven this into a dynamic, three-dimensional idea, imagine that you initiate an energy flow that begins in the feet and moves eventually up towards the heart. Think of this as a stream that, first, carves or scoops out the arches of the feet, from the base of the big toe, across the roof of the arch and into a dynamic lift at the front of the heel. Second, it flows along the circuits to the backs of the knees, scouring out a space from the top of the calves to the emergence of the hamstrings. And, third, it continues into an opening of the creases of the groins, the portals of the torso, before ascending in twin flows up on either side the spinal column towards the heart – where it floods out in a delta, spreading towards the shoulders and the collarbones.

Use the breath as an assistant. Initiate the flow of the current with the beginning of your inhale; then draw the flow on up as the inhale continues. You may want to do this in stages. Start by drawing from the arch of the foot to the back of knee. Then go from the arch to the knee to the groins. Finally energize the circuits all the way from the arch of the foot up to the heart – and beyond.

You may also want to experiment doing each side by itself. Do you find that one is more receptive than the other? You might want to switch

your legs, putting the other one on top and running the experiment again. Then see if you can simultaneously activate both circuits and channel the energy up and up on both sides at the same time.

### C. Releasing the Mud Slide of the Buttocks.

This is a nice little mystery. But it's simpler than you might think. Believe that in the course of your exhalation there comes a place, long about midway, where you can just let go and release the buttocks flesh so that, of its own accord, it begins to slide down, over the hips, like a rain-soaked hillside giving up its hold and slipping over the slope of the land, picking up speed somewhat as it goes, until it comes to a natural resting place. What you are looking for is the sense that it is the flesh that releases and slips down. This is not the same as using a muscular action to roll the hips back. If, however, at first you're having difficulty in finding this release, fair enough; go ahead and use that more physical part of the exhale pattern of the breath – think of coming into exhale cat pose – to better access that release. In time it may become an action that is (substantially) independent of the rest of back rounding exhale pattern.

In developing the previous Arch-to-Heart Tip, you may have found that it tends to deepen your natural low back curve a little too much. You may find yourself a little too forward into your front body. The release of the buttocks flesh is a nice corrective of this tendency. And, correlatively, if this Release of the Buttocks Tip has you somewhat rolled back and too much in the back body, a bit of the Arch-to-Heart idea may serve to bring balance.

### D. Dropping the Kidneys.

This is a great trick, one I learned some time ago from Ramanand Patel (if I remember correctly). Think of your kidneys as sitting somewhat in back of the upper abdominal region. (They typically extend from the twelfth thoracic to the third lumbar vertebrae.) You don't need to actually locate them internally; a general idea of where they are will do. Then come to your inner ears. Here also we are not seeking anatomical exactitude. Simply follow the ear canal in, on both sides. Then on an exhalation, drop the kidneys from the inner ears. This is one of those directives that make no sense until you actually experience the phenomenon; it doesn't *feel* like the kidneys hang from the inner ears until you release them and *feel* the drop. The effect may be quite surprising.

This trick can bring a new sense of ease to the mid- and lower-back, as well as a release down into the hips and legs. It is definitely a treat, in part because it is so unexpected.

#### E. Billowing the Armpits.

How to open and spread out the hollows of the armpits? With your hands placed on your thighs, induce a slight internal (forward) rotation of the shoulders. This tends to lift up the upper back of the armpits. Then also both drop down the lower back of the armpits and lift up the front of the armpits. This results in the top of the front of the armpits being slightly higher than the top of the back of the armpits. (Think of Richard Freeman’s “satisfied banker” pose, with your thumbs in your armpits and your elbows close to the body.) Then see if you can subtly float and broaden out the canopies of the armpits you have just unfurled.

This billowing of the armpits may be more accessible if you rest the back of one hand in the palm of the other and float them just below the navel. This more readily creates a natural expansion of the canopies, and you may more easily be able to smooth out any creases, or catches, in them.

Then connect each canopy back to the heart, as you also expand the lightness of the heart out into the float of each canopy. See if you can do this in such a way that the lift of one supports that of the other; and vice versa. (Indeed, you just might be able to connect the lift of the arches of the feet all the way up to the billow of the canopies of the armpits.)

#### F. Adjusting the Jaw to Permit the Hips to Fall Open.

More than once over the years I have heard Rodney Yee say that the hips won’t open if the jaw is tight. I discovered the next trick by sitting with this idea, asking if I could make it real in my sitting body.

What you need to do – or to let happen – is a bit tricky. As you begin to exhale, you want to relax the jaw so that it hangs freely enough that you can begin to feel the weight of it, or imagine that you can. Then lower the jaw so that the heel (you can touch it right there at the big bend) moves slightly down and just a little back, as if it wanted to nestle into the support of the throat. Finally, towards the completion of the exhale, let the hips fall

away from the jaw. Done “just right,” this can bring about an amazing feeling that the hips are falling apart and flopping on the floor. I compare this to what can happen with a marionette whose sticks someone is holding so that the feet just touch the floor. If the puppeteer somewhat drops the sticks, the lower pieces of the marionette fall akimbo, scattered on the floor. Something like this can be the feeling of the exhale release of the hips from the repositioned jaw.

Almost as amazing, however, is that it is not just the hips that become so spacious; there is also something of a rebound effect that creates an expansion in the heart and a release in the shoulders.

This, however, may not be one of the easiest suggestions to find. But feel free to prove me wrong.

#### G. Softening the Cavern of the Mouth.

The whole face wants to relax and soften. I include suggestions for two specific areas: the lips and then the tongue.

Beginning with the lips, they want to feel plump. Some time ago Ramanand Patel, in a series of Pranayama classes, kept saying, “your lips should feel that they neither touch nor do not touch.” He never elaborated, or if he did I didn’t catch it. Here’s my take. With the lips closed, moisten the inner edge of the lower lip. You may use the tip of your tongue, or just putting out the lower lip may serve the same purpose. This film of moisture then serves both as a seal (“the lips touch”) and as a separation (“the lips do not touch”), allowing you to simultaneously feel that they are joined, but also that they are independent of one another. These “equal and opposite” components of your experience may then create a sense of suspension, which draws you in.

Turning to the tongue, it too wants to feel plump. This is particularly true of the region from its root at the back of the mouth out through most of the tongue’s body. The untensed tongue then subsides towards the bottom of the mouth, where it hovers with its tip remaining untouching of any part. Now the tongue may feel almost sensation less, except at connection of its root.

#### H. Journeys of the Eyes.

Creating a softness of the mouth is a good preparation for relaxing the eyes. This is useful, indeed necessary, for what comes next.

I will suggest a series of travels or gazes of the closed eyes, each of which in its own way is a moving inward. But at the outset I need to mention that although I will speak of two different types of movements, neither should be thought of as involving any physical movement of the eyeballs, or at least any significant movement. So when I speak of moving the eyes within the head, this should be understood as encouraging an experience as if the eyes were moving, for example, drawing back into the head.

And when I speak of directing your gaze one way or another, this is not to be understood as involving any actual rotation of the eyeballs. To take an example that I will give, if I ask you to drop the gaze of your closed eyes to look down, it is your “inner eyes” (your gaze) that does this, and does so without any rotation of the physical eye itself. Thus, if (in this example) while you are directing your gaze down you were to lift your eyelids and open your eyes – which I do not suggest that you do – you would find that you were still looking forward.

a. Gazing Forward.

Begin by drawing the eyes, just slightly, more or less straight back. This is a small withdrawal. Then orient the gaze as if to look at the floor a short distance in front of you.

This is a fairly simple suggestion. But that does not mean that it is easy to sit for any length of time and maintain the gaze. As with all of the suggestions here, sooner or later the mind will wander and you will lose the gaze. Accept this. And reinstitute the gaze, if you so choose.

b. Gazing into the Heart.

As before, begin by drawing the eyes a little bit back in the head – perhaps just a smidgen more for this gaze. Then drop the gaze down to look into the heart. Note, do this without lowering your chin; this is not Jalandhara Bandha. Note also that your gaze enters the heart (or the general heart area) from *within* the body; it is not as if you were outside looking in.

This too is a relatively easy suggestion to follow. Maintain the gaze for any amount of time, though giving it up if it becomes work or in any way disturbs your state of steady, relaxed sitting. B. K. S. Iyengar says: “look down into the heart without hardening the eyeballs.” *Light on Pranayama*, p. 60.

c. Journeying Back to Look Forward.

Beginning with this suggestion, you may find the ideas somewhat more challenging, less easy to readily take up.

Here we continue with the suggestion to draw the eyes back and ask if we can withdraw them so far that it almost feels as if the eyeballs gently snuggle up against the inner surface of the back of the head (cranium). Then from here gaze forward.

Be aware if you are holding your breath, or otherwise disturbing an easy pattern of breathing.

d. Gazing Backward.

Gently draw the eyes slightly back. Then rotate the gaze 180 degrees so that it is as if you were looking at the back of the head (from the inside, of course) – or as if looking through the back of the head and out into the world behind you.

Notice if this tends lift your breath up towards your throat and bring on a shallow pattern of breathing. If so, relax – particularly the lower abdomen – to permit an easier breathing to return.

e. Opening the Third Eye.

This time we draw the eyes back somewhat (but not all the way to the back of the head), and then rotate our gaze slightly upward to look at the space above the bridge of the nose and between the two eyebrows. As in gazing into the heart, now gaze at this space from the inside. We might say that we are gazing into the back of the third eye.

f. Pratyahara.

Once again draw the eyes back into the head, somewhere (in this case) just a bit back of midway between the front and back of the head. And then, rather than gazing one way or another, simply close the “inner eyes,” the eyes of your gaze. You might imagine draping curtains over the front of your “inner eyes.” Notice how this feels. The quiet. Then go ahead and drape other curtains down over the backs of your “inner eyes,” so that they are now enclosed front and back. Then come to one of your inner ears and draw it back into that small space of your “inner eyes” – and drape a curtain over that side. Repeat the process with your other ear. With the fall of the last curtain you have entirely closed off that intimate, inner space.

Having withdrawn the senses to create this space, can you be here?