



DAVID MARTINEZ

Phillip Moffitt: Mind at the Center of Posture

“I WAS DOING A SHOULDER STAND on a wooden deck,” says Phillip Moffitt, recalling an experience he had after studying yoga for three years. “It was very uncomfortable, but as I was holding it, I realized the pose could become a form of meditation if, instead of focusing on getting my body exactly right, I made my mind the center of the posture. This was a yogic yoking of the mind, and to me it was revolutionary. It changed the way I did yoga.”

Commenting on the relationship between body and mind, Moffitt, who writes regularly for *Yoga Journal* and teaches Vipassana meditation at retreat centers across the United States, says that in terms of ordinary reality, body and mind are separable, but in terms of ultimate reality, they are empty of anything lasting.

“Both ordinary mind and the body are characterized primarily by arising and passing,” he explains. “They exist this moment. They’re gone the next. Your body isn’t like it was. There is nothing to cling to because it’s a different body. As for the mind, it’s a stream—that stream you can never put your foot in twice. This is not a philosophy. It’s the observable nature of ordinary reality.”

According to Moffitt, when one understands impermanence, the mind’s tendency to grab on to things of the past, present, or future is radically altered. No matter how difficult

the past was, for example, or how much you miss it because it was wonderful, or how much you wish it had been different, gradually the clinging subsides. “Imagine you used to be able to do a great headstand,” Moffitt says. “But you’ve got this injury and now you can’t do a headstand at all. Ordinary ego mind goes, ‘Oh no, I want to be able to do the headstand.’ Yet once you realize that everything is arising and passing, you might say, ‘I wish I could do a headstand but I can’t,’ and that’s the end. You still have the preference, but you don’t have the suffering. That’s liberation of insight, and you can find that liberation through studying the body or studying the mind.”

Moffitt’s primary teacher is the Venerable Ajahn Sumedho, of the Theravadan Buddhist tradition, yet he also studies yoga with a swami in India. Neither Moffitt nor his teachers see any conflict. Yoga and Buddhism overlap, Moffitt explains. Both practices seek freedom of mind; they just have different frameworks. To give an example, he asks us to imagine a problem at work: “You’ve got this deadline and a person isn’t giving you the information you need. So you’re stuck and it’s frustrating. From a yoga point of view, that’s a stretch. It’s another asana. How can you be stretched this way and yet not have your mind fluctuate? From a mindfulness point of view, on the other hand, this is a lesson in learning to be responsible to meet your deadline but not be attached to it.” ♦

Yoga for Meditators

Well-known yoga teacher Desirée Rumbaugh offers a short series of poses that will improve your sitting practice.

IF YOUR SITTING PRACTICE is causing your feet to fall asleep, your knees to ache, or your lower back to feel sore, this short sequence of yoga postures may help you meditate more comfortably. These simple hip-opening stretches strengthen and tone the muscles in your inner thighs, outer hips, and lower back in a way that gradually softens the physical resistance your body may have to seated meditation.

To go through these poses once requires about ten minutes, but they can be repeated for even better results. Initially, I recommend that you practice the sequence daily as a preparation to sitting. Then gradually, as your weaker muscles become stronger and your tighter muscles loosen, you will be able to reduce the amount of time you spend preparing to sit. You will discover that your entire body is adapting to your seated meditation posture with greater ease and comfort.



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Child's Pose

Kneel with your knees apart and your big toes together. Sit down slowly, scooping your tailbone to gently activate your abdominal muscles. Now, if possible, you are sitting with your buttocks resting on your heels. Take deep breaths and allow your hips to become heavy so that your muscles begin to relax. Gradually walk your fingers forward, keeping your abdominal muscles engaged and your buttocks grounded to your heels. Then, with your fingertips pressing into the floor, lift your arm bones and gently lower your head. If your forehead doesn’t reach the floor, place a blanket underneath it. Remain here for five slow breaths. If you are unable to sit firmly on your heels, it is OK to allow for a little space between them and your buttocks. Do the best you can. Over time, you will see some improvement.



Lunge

Step forward with your right foot and keep your left knee on the ground, with your left toes tucked under. Firm the muscles of both legs and take deep, steady breaths as you lower your elbows one at a time toward the floor. Allow your front knee to bend as deeply as possible. If you feel stiff or restricted, you can create more ease by increasing the width between your feet. The stronger the muscular “hug” you can give to the bones in your legs and arms, the more hip-opening power you will experience. Stay in this position for several breaths, then switch sides. Repeat.

Eye of the Needle

Lie on your back with your knees bent and your feet flat on the floor. Cross your right ankle over your left leg, just below your left knee. Flex your feet and ankles and spread your toes as wide as you can. For safer and more effective hip opening without strain to the knees, hug your muscles strongly to your bones. Hold the back of your left thigh with both hands and draw your left leg toward your chest. Breathe slowly and steadily, releasing tension from your outer right hip with each exhalation. To deepen the intensity of this stretch, lengthen your spine and take your sitting bones downward toward the earth, creating a curve in your back. Repeat this stretch with your left ankle crossed over your right leg.



Supine Bent Leg Stretch

Lying on your back, bend your right leg and hold your right foot with both hands. Keep your feet flexed and spread your toes as you activate all of the muscles in your leg. With your left leg straight and the muscles in both legs fully engaged, bend your right leg to a ninety-degree angle. Hold your shin steady as you move your right thigh and knee a little more to the right. This action will make it easier for you to move your right knee down toward the floor. Repeat with your left leg. Practice this pose twice on each side and notice how it feels easier each time.



Seated Twist

Sit with your right leg crossed over your left leg. If you have pain in your left knee when you bend it, it is alright to keep that leg straight. Hold your right knee with your left hand and place your right fingers on the floor. Push down into the floor with your right hand as you resist against your left hand with your right leg. Try to separate your thighbones and sitting bones from each other, and keep that action strong as you lower your right hip to the floor. Little by little you will be able to ground both of your sitting bones equally, which will broaden the muscles of your lower back. From that place of freedom, inhale and lengthen your spine from the base to the top of your head. Exhale and twist, keeping your right shoulder back and your neck and head extended and strong. Remain in this position for two more breaths, then repeat on the other side.



Seated Hip Opener

Begin in a kneeling position and cross your right leg in front of your left leg. Flex your feet and spread your toes as much as you can. Keeping your arms extended and supporting your weight with your fingertips, sit back, bringing your hips toward the floor. Breathe with steadiness. Gradually your hips should touch the floor, but if they don't you can place a blanket under your sitting bones. To deepen the stretch, bend forward and, on your fingertips, support your upper body with strong arms. Wherever you are in the pose, hold it for three long breaths on each side, then repeat. ♦