

The Quick Guide to Pain-free Meditation



**One simple change
you can make
right now that can
transform your
meditation practice**

Chris Moffett, PhD

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*Listen, are you breathing just a little
and calling it a life?*

—Mary Oliver



Take a look at this photo for a moment. If you Google “meditation,” you’ll see hundreds just like it. (Take a second and try it, if you want.) The most obvious thing about it is how typical it is: a typical image of ‘someone having an a-typical experience.’ Meditation. You could imagine it, or another just like it, on the cover of any number of magazines. Why is that? As odd as the image is, if you start to think about it, at a basic level isn’t it reminding us of a potential feeling? Some sense of sublime, serene, joyous experience? Something evocative of why we turn to meditation in the first place.

The image does its work, and then we move on. But if we stay with it a little longer, it reveals an interesting dilemma that plagues even seasoned meditators. So let’s sit with it for a bit.

Take a moment to see if you can imagine what she is feeling. The emotion through her body and in her face. The sense of openness. Can you feel it? Now get a sense of her sitting posture and how it might feel. Okay, now imagine holding that posture for a few minutes... The model in the photo probably held the pose for the camera for only a moment, projecting blissful eternity. (Did you know that car seats are made to be super-comfortable for six minutes—the average length of time a new car buyer takes to make a decision...?)

So let's wait it out a bit... Imagine you've been sitting like the person in the picture for twenty minutes. Or for an hour. Every day.

What would it feel like? Can you get a sense of how this might not be the most sustainable posture in the long run? How long would it be before your neck started hurting? How long before the gentle smile became strained? Where else would you feel yourself holding? What parts of yourself might start turning painful or numb?

Think about your own posture. How is it similar or different from hers? What does sitting feel like for you after a while? Take your time and feel it...

Okay, let that go!

Now take a moment and imagine what it would feel like if you could sit easily and effortlessly, without strain or discomfort. So effortlessly that when you are done you stand up even more gracefully than when you sat down. What do you think that would do to your sense of your meditation practice? What would it *feel* like?

On the loftiest throne in the world we are still sitting only on our own rump.

—Montaigne

If you think about it, one of the primary strategies of meditation is to settle yourself into a position. So it makes sense that the quality of that position might have an impact on the quality of your meditation.

Don't get me wrong, for most people a truly balanced and effortless sitting position will take some time and work to find. (Although not nearly as much as you might imagine!) Still, it's not necessarily a quick fix. Probably you've noticed this for yourself. Quick fixes don't tend

to work so well. You think you aren't sitting straight enough, or your shoulders aren't where they should be, or your legs, so you quickly "fix" your position. But how well does this work? How long before you either find yourself back to your habitual posture, or you start feeling the strain of holding yourself "properly"?

It can be frustrating and discouraging. Without knowing a smarter way of going about it, we tough it out and hope for improvement. The truth is, this isn't a great strategy, and there is another way. You *can* find your way to effortless balance. But to even get there you have to get

in the game first. And then, once you are there, we can really start to play and improve. But first you have to set yourself up to succeed.

What if we could make serious headway on that in the next 10 minutes? That's what I want to show you in this quick tweak. There's some low hanging fruit that we can pick right now. Fruit that will continue to nourish you and set you up for further improvements. The trick is to get out of the morass of difficult-to-maintain postures like the one we saw in the photograph earlier, a morass that leaves us stuck, despite our good intentions.

In fact, probably without even thinking about it too much, most of us are already doing something to keep from getting stuck. The simplest, quickest thing you can do to help yourself out is to *sit on something*. In other words, just change your sitting height!

It's a bit anticlimatic, especially because most of us are already doing this to some degree. The extreme version is to just sit in a chair, and somewhere in the middle is using a cushion or bench. All of these can help get you into a position where you can start working on your posture. All we are going to do now is fine tune this a bit more. Maybe you've even tried adjusting your seating to suit your own needs better. And yet, at some point it is easy to find yourself making do with a less than ideal set up—enough, perhaps, to get by. It's something that even experienced meditators can overlook or implement poorly. When I first started out, I had just gotten myself a zafu and sat on it. Or tried. It was agony, and I just tried to tough it out. I didn't realize I could make things so much easier.

The trick is to get the height dialed in. And that's what I want to show you how to do now. Everyone is different, and the intricacies of balance, breathing, and posture can be fruitfully explored for a lifetime. But if you follow this simple procedure, it will get you quickly and easily into the game and set you up beautifully for improvement.

Let's get started...

The Single Easiest & Most Fundamental Change to Your Meditation Practice

Let's say it one more time: adjust the height of your support! But why that? There are plenty of things you can do to improve your sitting posture, comfort, and meditation. Because your cushion is external to you, it's easy to change quickly and is also a form of leverage. Like a lever & fulcrum, creating some more distance either increases the result you get from your efforts or

Optimal sitting-height creates the conditions for even further improvements in comfort, poise, and attention. Sitting well leads to sitting well. You not only immediately feel the benefits, but they compound over time.

allows you to work a lot less. So if you want to make a difference, first things first.

What I'm going to show you is how to find the most neutral sitting position *for you*, by adjusting your zafu.

Gathering Materials

Get it together! Before we talk about sitting dynamics, let's get everything you'll need together. Here's what you'll need:

- This guide. Either print it out, or work off the PDF, but keep it handy.
- Whatever cushions you normally use to sit and meditate. If you don't have cushions, don't worry. For now just grab 2-4 towels. Otherwise, a zabuton and zafu are good. The zabuton is the wide cushion for your legs that you place directly on the floor. The zafu is smaller and taller; it's what you sit your pelvis on.
- A stack of children's books. Pick good stories. Okay, just kidding: art books, anatomy textbooks, encyclopedias, or whatever you can find that is wide and stable enough to stack to sit on are all good. Get more than you think you'll need. A few thinnish ones will also help...
- A ruler. If you don't have a ruler handy, you can just make a mark on a piece of paper and measure later. But have something ready to use.

The Bare Bones of Sitting

Okay, so before we get started, we need a bit of a crash course on sitting dynamics and some basic functional anatomy. We're tweaking the height of your sitting for one reason only: to find a neutral balance.

The knee bone is connected to the...

Our legs want to be under us. We're designed to walk and move in an upright position. When we sit or lower ourselves, our legs have to go somewhere, typically out in front of us. And when we do that there is a tendency of the rest of us to roll backwards. As the legs go forward, the body naturally tries to reestablish that long relationship. When this happens, to keep from falling over or lying down, we compensate by pulling hard with our muscles, holding ourselves up and bent. (Some people have very flexible hips and can balance sitting here without any effort or support. However, they are the exception and often they have their own struggles! If this is you, you'll still benefit from going through this process.) So the challenge is to find a way to reduce this effort while bringing us closer to our natural upright position. This is why zafus exist: to give us some room to get our legs under us in gravity, so we don't have to struggle to sit.

What we are looking for is a height that allows us to balance upright without muscular effort and without being so high that we lose stability. (This is one of the reasons meditation is often

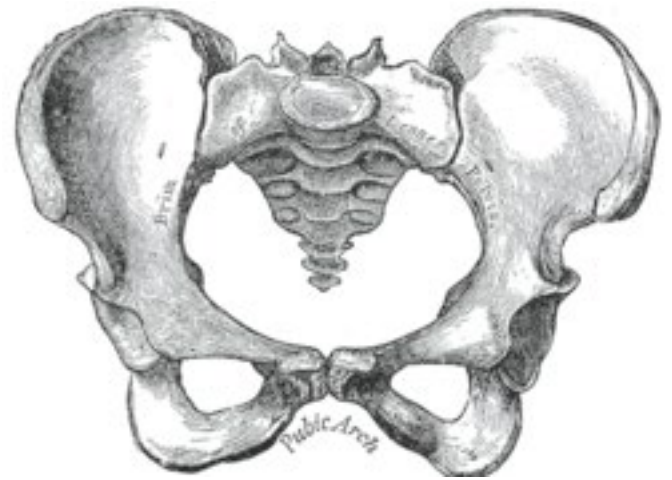
done sitting! It reduces the complexity of balancing so far away from the ground. And lying down reduces it so much that it becomes conducive to sleep!)

So what we are looking for is Goldilock's position. Not too high, not too low. Somewhere in the middle is a pocket that allows for poised, balanced, effortless sitting.

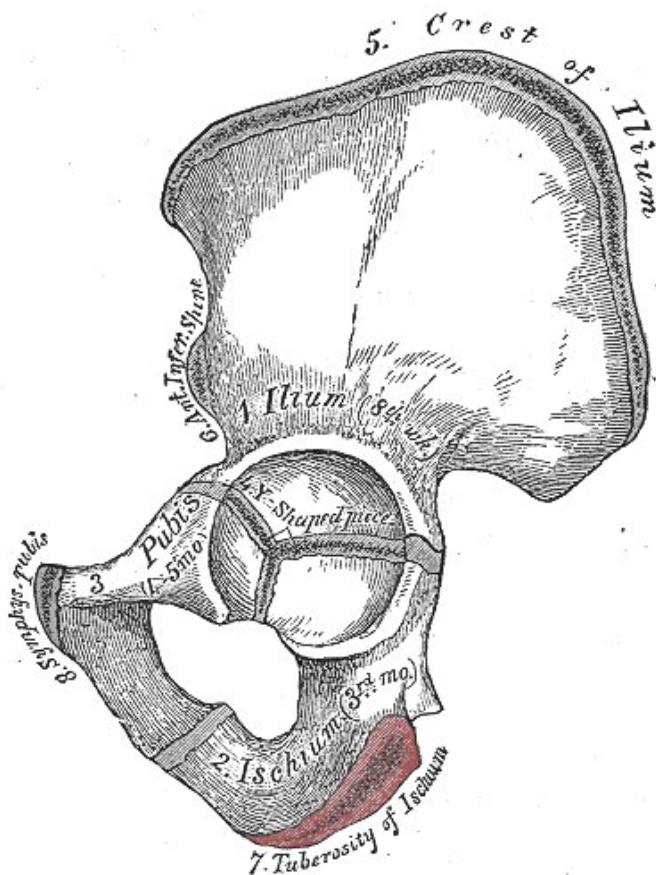
Okay, next...

A Crash Course in Your Pelvis

So if you think about it, sitting is largely defined by the relationship between our upper legs and the orientation of our lower torso or pelvis. We tend to call the place where these come together our hips, but if you were to point precisely to your hips, you might find this to be a rather elusive task. There's actually a lot going on in there. So let's flesh it out a little bit.



If you sit down on a hard surface, you will likely feel that your pelvis makes firm contact in two places. Our butts are a little padded, but you should be able to feel two bony parts pressing through. These are your Ischial Tuberosity, or informally, the Sitz bones or sitting bones. You can see them in the image above: they are the two rounded edges at the very bottom. You can see the side view in the image to the left (7. Tuberosity of Ischium).



Notice that they are very much like the rockers on a rocking chair. This is important for two reasons. One is that our hip socket—the round cup in the middle where our legs connect with our pelvis—is outside and above this rocker. This means, when we rock forward or back, we are rocking the pelvis *between* our legs. In other words, we don't really rest on our legs, like we do when we are standing. This is important for us to understand if we want to sit effortlessly. We

are looking for a resting place between our legs where the rocker can balance freely without our gripping with the large muscles connecting our leg and pelvis.

This strategy of holding ourselves upright by pulling on the legs is very common. You can often feel it as a kind of squeezing in the front of your hips. (Try it for yourself. Sit directly on the floor, with your legs crossed, and feel for any contraction in the crease of your hip. If you let it go, you'll likely find yourself falling over backward.) This is actually a good thing. Because now we have a sensation we can look for that tells us when we are in a less than optimal position. And conversely, when we are poised, our legs and hips can be relaxed while our sitz bones can rock freely and settle somewhere balanced in the middle.

This brings us to the second reason we need to be clear on our sitz-bone-rockers: they are literally the support for the spine. As your sitz bones go, so goes your posture! Really simply, when you roll back on them, your lower back tends to round, and when you roll forward, your lower back arches. (If your back stays straight as you roll, you'll of course lean forward and back.) Just as with the legs, what we are looking for is a nice balanced position for the sitz bones where the large muscles connecting your lower back to your pelvis are relaxed and free. If you aren't balanced easily, you will find yourself locking your lower back into an arch or a slump, pulling with your back or abdominal muscles. (Try it! Sitting on the floor, notice the arching or rounding of your lower back, and feel for any effort to hold this position. Try exaggerating and then slowly letting it go. Notice how this makes it difficult to rock your sitz bones freely and how it might make it hard to breathe easily in your abdomen.) Strain and holding here will tend to travel all the way up to the upper back, shoulders, neck, and face. Conversely, when the pelvis can roll freely, the rest of the spine can settle into place on this support.

A Quick Trick for Figuring Out Your Optimal Height

Okay, so that's the crash course, now let's put it to use. The task now is to see how changing the height at which you sit can free up your sitz bones to balance freely, without holding with your legs or torso. So let's connect the sensations of holding that we just discovered and connect them to the extremes of height. First, let's notice what too high and too low feel like.

Go through this with me.

- Start without anything under you. Sit cross legged on the floor. Notice how sharp the angle is between your legs and your torso. (Many of you will find that your pelvis is already rolled back, and you have to bring your head forward to keep upright!)
- Take a moment to feel where on your sitz bones you feel like you are resting. Make a mental note of it, as best you can.
- Now try rocking on your sitz bones, forward and back. Does one direction feel easier than the other? Does it feel fluid and easy? Could you do it quickly without any effort? If not, where can you feel yourself working? In your hips, legs, feet? In your back, abdomen, shoulders, neck? Do you hold yourself with your arms? Don't worry about it, just notice what you are doing. Take your time to feel it...

- Now grab your stack of books, and this time find a really high perch. As high as is easy.
- Try rocking from here. Is it easier to come forward? Where do you feel yourself struggling? Is it stable or precarious?
- Now take out some books and try someplace in the middle that you think might be good for you. Does it feel balanced? Take your time. Is it a little bit easier to roll forward or backward? Where do you feel yourself resting on your sitz bones? Would it feel more stable and easier to be higher or lower?
- Take a guess, and try it. Notice how it feels. Roll a little bit forward and back on your sitz bones. Is it smoother or harder? Would it feel nicer to be a bit higher or lower? If you aren't sure, take a guess.
- Now keep going. See if you can keep honing in on a good height. If it's obvious that you want to go higher or lower, go for it. But then check. How does it feel? Where are you on your sitz bones? How easily can you move forward and back? Then add or remove a book, and see how it goes then. Try adding or removing a thinner book. If it gets harder to tell the difference, guess and then try it out. See if you can find a height that you couldn't possibly tell whether it'd be better to go higher or lower.

Okay, one more quick lesson on functional anatomy: the knees...

While you are sitting, trying higher and lower, rolling forward and back, let's add one last piece of the puzzle: the knees.

You might notice that the lower you sit, the more your knees tend to come up. Take a look at the photo we started with. Sitting on the ground, her knees come up to float in the air. Conversely, the higher you sit, the wider and lower your knees drape, and the more easily they might rest on the floor. When they come effortlessly in contact with the ground, you create a wide base of support. This allows the legs to rest and not pull on the pelvis, allowing it to roll easily.

Let's bring that into our sensations a little more clearly. Sit on the floor while standing your feet shoulder width or somewhere comfortably in front of you. Rest your hands behind you.

- Bring your knees out to both sides a bit. Gently a few times. And as you do that, feel: does it feel more natural to roll your sitz bones forward or back as you do that? Both are possible. Try them.
- Now bring your knees together a few times. Where do your sitz bones want to roll as you close your knees? See if you can coordinate the movement of your knees and the rolling of your sitz bones. Once you can feel them move together, try doing the opposite with your sitz bones. See if you can make that work as well.

- Let that go. Now standing your feet in front of you and resting back on your hands, roll your sitz bones forward and back. Notice what your knees want to do.

There is much to explore here, but in general the higher you sit, the easier it is to let your knees settle to the sides. (But the higher they are from the ground to start with!) That said, you might find that no matter how high you adjust your height, your knees can't come to rest. And you just start feeling precarious. Don't leave them hanging. Either meditate sitting in a chair to start or get some support underneath your knees. Once you find a place that allows you to roll forward and back, and feels comfortable, then get something under your knees to support them. A rolled up towel or t-shirt will do. And keep adjusting them, checking the height of your book stack until you your sitz bones feel the most free to roll.

It's okay if you aren't sure. That means you are in the vicinity. Settle into something that feels like a good place for you to sit with.

Sidebar on Chairs

If no matter how high you raise your cushions on the floor, you struggle to get up or down, or for whatever reason you just feel more comfortable sitting in a chair, the same principles still apply. You want a stable flat chair. The less it looks like it's trying to shape to you or support you the better. And ideally you want to sit on the front of it without using the backrest. To test the best height, just do the same thing with the books, stacking them on a low chair or stool. Once you find an ideal height, either have a flat chair or stool cut to fit, or find some padding that will bring a chair up to the height that works for you. For floor sitters, read on...

We must realize that posture is not a static sort of thing. Anyone can learn to be poised and comfortable in any position and create effective, pain-free movement.

—Moshe Feldenkrais

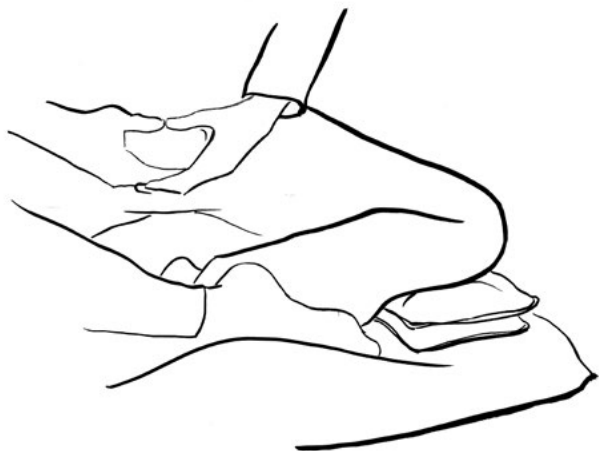
So now what? Applying what you've learned...

I would recommend playing with this for the next few days. No need to rush. This will be an ongoing process, and as you go, your sitting will change as a result. So for now, try it out, and each day, before you meditate, try taking out or adding a book, and see if that feels easier. Compare and contrast!

Over a few days, you'll get a sense of what works for you. That's your height for now. You'll want to adjust your cushions so that you don't have to use the books any more.

Here's how to adjust your seating. First, what many people don't realize is that most good cushions are adjustable. Look for an opening where you can add or take away stuffing. Next, if you don't know, determine what kind of stuffing you have: kapoc or buckwheat. Kapoc is

fibrous and feels billowy to start, but it packs down into matting. Buckwheat is granular and feels like a beanbag. Kapoc will settle down in height dramatically over time and then feel very stable. It will also largely maintain its height, and each time will reshape to your form a bit, like sand. But in either case the game is the same.



Take out or add stuffing to change the height. Just keep in mind that kapoc will change significantly over time. If your zafu is too high, great, just take some out and try it. If you need more, and there is still room in the zafu, you can get the stuffing separately and add it in. Don't stuff it so much that

it is bursting. It won't be able to adjust to you so well.

Instead, if you need more height, get a support cushion or two. These are just flat cushions that you can put underneath your zafu to raise it higher.

Measure the height of your book stack with your ruler and use that to estimate how much additional height you'll need. Keep adding or taking away support until you can match the height you discovered using the books. The whole point of the books is to speed up the process of dialing in a good height. So use them for that and keep the stack handy and compare it to your cushioning until they feel the same.

These forms are not a means of obtaining the right state of mind. To take this posture itself is the purpose of our practice. When you have this posture, you have the right state of mind.

—Shunryu Suzuki

The same thing goes for your knees. If they need support you can keep using a rolled up towel, t-shirt, or cushion. And that's it. Now you are good to go!

What Next?

As you keep sitting, you are going to keep noticing more things. You'll feel new struggles, pains,

discomforts. But also, since you aren't straining, your body will relax and adapt much faster than if you were trying to tough it out. As your sitting skill increases, you will want to revisit this process again. Maybe you'll want to check again in a few weeks or a few months. And over time, you will want to revisit this every month or few months to see if your needs have changed or your cushion has settled. (If you are like me, unless you make a note in your calendar, you'll forget. So maybe make a note now while you're thinking about it!)

With your sitting height dialed in, you can continue to refine your poise and ease in sitting, knowing that you are doing so from an optimal position. Let this become part of your sitting practice. Each time you sit down, feel your contact with your supports. Scan for any strain or holding in your legs or upper body. Find the place where your sitz bones can roll easily forward and back. Notice your balance and breathe with it...

As you practice, you'll notice so many more things to learn and improve. Keep exploring. The next step is to really understand and improve your sitting form. For guided movement meditations designed to rapidly improve your sitting posture, go to <http://poisedmeditation.com/effortless-sitting/>

These movement meditations are designed not only to walk you through sitting without pain and discomfort, but to tap into the relationship between effortless balance and attention.

In the meantime, keep exploring for yourself what feels right for you. Trust your sensation!

Next Steps...

- Establish a practice of settling in each time you sit. Feel the height, your effort, the freedom of your sitz bones. Play with it.
- Make a note in your calendar to revisit this exercise a month from now and hone in your new ideal height.
- Contact me. Do you have questions about any of this? Particular issues? Just want to say hello? Email me at chris@poisedmeditation.com and I'll get back to you!
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