

Guidelines for setting up a spiritual practice

by

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Q. Should one face a particular direction when meditating and are there other guidelines you can provide?

A. Generally speaking, any practice or *sadhana* is better than no practice, and it is not necessary in the beginning to be too concerned with facing a particular direction, or even where and when it's being done. Frequent travelers have to practice in hotel rooms and at various time zones. The key is regularity such that at least every twelve hours, one practices - this keeps the momentum of spiritual transformation.

However, as one makes progress on the spiritual path, a certain sensitivity to electromagnetic and other minute phenomena arises. One of these phenomenon that we do not normally consider, is the movement of the earth around its axis. This movement is observed by the rising of the sun in the east and its setting in the west.

It is well known that some people are uncomfortable or even nauseas when sitting in a train facing the opposite direction to its direction of motion. In the same way, it is best to face east when doing one's *sadhana*, as this would place one in the direction of the earth's movement. The effect of facing west may make it more difficult to meditate and increase the time to get comfortably settled into a particular state of consciousness.

If for whatever reason, you cannot face east, then it is recommended by the yogic masters that facing north would be the next best. Facing north aligns the body with the earth's magnetic field.

Of course, when you begin a practice, there are many factors that will impede progress, factors that need to be dealt with and overcome, before we need to consider about which direction to face.

The biggest hurdle is the mental resistance to sitting for the *sadhana* in the first place. It is not easy to get up early in the morning and perform the breathing and meditation techniques that one has learned and must put into practice to derive the benefits from. The best solution to overcome this unwillingness is regularity. Set an achievable goal of doing the practice at the same time in the morning and evening for a period of, let's say, two weeks. Now, this is achievable. It will still take a measure of self-control and determination, but the goal of two weeks should not be a strain. What you will find after two weeks is that you may actually look forward to the two sessions of practice, and it will take less and less effort. It seems strange, but the mind will rebel and come up with all sorts of obstacles, real or imagined, if you make the determination that you will do a consistent practice for the next twenty years, but will provide less resistance if you take it two weeks at a time!

The next hurdle is the physical discomfort. It is difficult to concentrate when the back and knees are aching. The best solution for developing a firm and pain-free sitting posture is the practice of the Kriya Hatha Yoga postures. These develop flexibility in the back and knees, among all the other physical and energetic benefits. They also release the causes of discomfort, generally psychosomatic traumas, held in the muscles and joints. Therefore it is necessary to keep a consistent *asana* or physical postures practice.

In the mornings, you can utilize the preliminary movements for posture #4 (fish pose or *meenasana*) – they help to loosen the ankles, knees and hips. In addition, you may want to add an auxiliary pose called the cobbler's pose (*badhakonasana*) that counters backache and sciatica, besides loosening up the knees and hip joints.

The cobbler's pose is practiced in the following way: sit on the floor with a straight, but relaxed back. Straighten the legs forward and then bend the knees and bring the heels close to the groin area as you exhale. Keep breathing normally for a minute or two in this position, then on another exhale, allow the knees to fall towards the sides as far as comfortable, and bring the soles and heels of the feet together. Catch hold of the feet with your hands and utilize micro-movements to lower the knees further to the floor by pressing the thighs with elbow and forearms. Make sure your back is not bent, and breathe normally. Maintain this pose for up to three minutes. Exhale and release the feet, straighten the legs and relax. This pose will, over time, help you to sit comfortably on the floor for longer periods of time.

Another important aid to establishing a consistent practice is to maintain a permanent location for it. Instead of moving around in the house, try to set aside a particular site that doesn't get into anyone's way and is relatively quiet and private. By practicing in that particular place, a spiritual field is gradually built up there. This will help to set up the right conditions for your meditation. The more that you practice in that space, the more it will benefit you. Many people make pilgrimages to sacred places where the great yogis have meditated in the past because they have left a little bit of their spiritual energy in those locations, and it is so much easier to meditate around such sites. Although we are not such great yogis yet, even we can build up enough energy to make our meditation space sacred.

A further refinement to be considered is to keep a practice mat and cushion only for use during your *sadhana* – they should not be used for any other purpose. The mat can be a simple woolen blanket or a wooly sheep-skin, but should not be made of synthetic material. The woolen material helps to insulate the practitioner from the grounding effect of the earth so that the spiritual and *pranic* (life-force) energy can be built up within the body. Another benefit is that the mat will retain some of the energy from your practice and set up a better meditative environment for you.

The space and seat are very helpful to build your very own sacred spot, your own energy vortex. After taking care of the mental, physical and spatial hurdles, you may want to add the refinement of facing east as well.