



Yoga Teacher Training

Teaching and Practicing Seated Postures

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Teaching and Practicing Seated Postures

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Teaching and Practicing Seated Postures

Introduction

Seated postures are generally more calming and nurturing than standing and balancing postures, although some are fairly active, requiring a stronger engagement of certain muscles. Sitting poses usually fall into three categories: 1) forward bends (or otherwise flexing the hips), whereby the trunk and legs come towards each other; 2) spinal twists, in which the spine rotates to both the left and right, and 3) spinal extensions, in which the back is arched while the legs are on the ground. When planning seated postures for a class, try to incorporate all three types of postures so that the spine and hips are moved in many different directions.

When practiced with proper alignment of the spine and pelvis, seated postures promote vitality, improve circulation, reduce fatigue and soothe the nervous system. Forward bending seated postures stretch the entire back, creating more flexibility and often relieve sciatic pain due to pressure on the sciatic nerve. The stable base created by sitting frees you from the concerns of balancing or supporting the body, leaving you more energy to devote to the stretching. However, due to such habits as slouching in chairs for long periods of time and not being in the habit of sitting cross legged, there is often some basic work to be done before students can fully enjoy these asanas. For example, when practicing forward bending seated postures, it is important for students to maintain a flat back (or lengthen the spine) by pressing back through the tailbone and reaching forward with the chest. This helps to strengthen and properly stretch the muscles of the back. Rounding the upper back during a seated forward fold can weaken and strain back muscles.

Seated forward bends stretch the hamstrings and engage the abdominal muscles. Seated twists massage the abdominal organs and aid the digestive process. They also improve lateral flexion (side bending) of the spine and remove stiffness in the neck and upper back. Seated spinal extensions help to open the chest and stretch the muscles across the front of the chest and shoulders.

Sitting poses are best done after standing poses – once the muscles are sufficiently warm. The yoga poses in this part of the manual are ordered in the way that they would be sequenced in a yoga class. Make special note of this ordering when designing your own classes.

Teaching and Practicing Seated Postures

Pigeon (Eka Pada Rajakapotasana)



Benefits:

- Opens the hips, thighs, chest and shoulders
- Stimulates digestion

Steps:

- Start in down dog or on all fours
- Bend right knee, sweep right knee forward, placing right knee close to right wrist
- Move right foot forward towards left wrist
- Press left foot back, dropping hips as close to floor as possible
- Draw finger tips back and squeeze shoulder blades together
- Look up and breathe deeply, staying in this position for 3-4 slow breaths
- From here, you can go back to starting position or do the following variations:

Variations:

Variation 1



Variation 2



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Variation 1:

From Pigeon, walk hands forward and drop chest and forehead towards the floor
This provides a more intense stretch for the rotator muscles of the hip and thigh –
remind students to carefully come into this position
Stay in this position for 4-5 deep breaths

Variation 2:

From Pigeon:

- Bend back knee, placing back foot in elbow crease of same arm (left arm above)
- Inhale, reach right arm overhead, then bend elbow, dropping right hand down back towards left hand
- Clasp hands together, if possible
- Square hips towards the front
- Stay in this position for 4-5 long, slow breaths

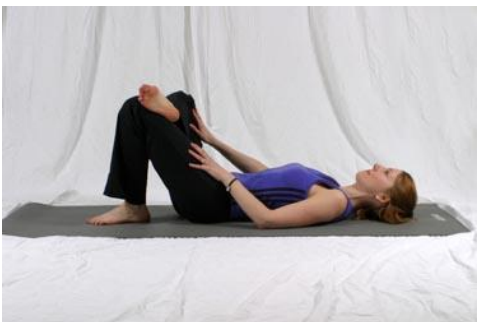
Teaching Points:

Students will often lean onto the same hip as their bent knee due to limited hip flexibility. Encourage students to keep their hips a few inches off the floor and square their hips forward, only dropping down as much as is comfortable for them. This will help to focus the stretch on the hip rotator muscles.

Modification:

For students who have knee problems, have them practiced “reclined hip opener” (see later in this section) instead of pigeon. It will still stretch the hip rotator muscles, but without placing pressure on the knee.

Reclined Hip Opener



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Kneeling/Sitting on Heels (Bhujrasana)



Benefits:

- Stretches the toes, feet and ankles
- Improves flexibility of the knees and hips
- Relieves low back tension

Steps:

- Start on all fours (hands and knees)
- Sit back on heels, while raising torso
- Lift up through the top of the head and tuck tailbone slightly to lengthen the spine
- Stay in this position for 3-4 long breaths, focusing on breath, or move onto other postures that use sitting on heels as a base

Variation:

Sitting on Heels with Toes Curled Under



In this variation the toes are curled under, providing an intense stretch for the toes and arches of the feet.

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Counter any kneeling positions with Down Dog to stretch out the backs of the legs.



Teaching Points:

Remind students to tuck their tailbone slightly under to prevent a swayback which can place strain on the low back. Also, with beginning students make sure not to keep them in this position too long, otherwise their legs may feel overly stiff.

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Child's Pose (Balasana)



Benefits:

- Relieves stress and anxiety
- Gently stretches the back
- Alleviates headache
- Stretches the ankles, knees and hips

Steps:

- Sit on heels
- Fold forward, bringing chest towards thighs and forehead towards floor
- Keep hands at sides with palms turned up
- Stay in this position for 4-5 breaths, breathing into back
- Raise head and chest to come back to sitting

Variation:

Students may also like to extend their arms in front of them. This provides a deeper stretch to the back. To increase the stretch in the upper back or neck, suggest that students tuck their chin towards their chest.

Modification:

Some students may find it uncomfortable to fold forward in this position, finding it more difficult to breathe. Suggest that students spread their knees apart to make more room for their belly, making breathing easier.

Teaching Points:

Encourage students to breathe into the bottom part of their lungs, so that the belly presses against thighs on inhale, and belly relaxes on exhale. This provides a gentle massage to the internal organs and helps to strengthen the diaphragm.

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Melting Heart (Anahatasana)



Benefits:

- Opens the chest and shoulders
- Relieves tension in the upper back
- Calms the nervous system

Steps:

- Start in all fours, with your hands directly under your shoulders and your knees at a right angle and directly under your hips.
- Keeping your hips directly over your knees, begin to walk your hands forward as you drop your chest towards the floor.
- If it feels okay, you can bring your chin to the floor and look straight ahead, otherwise drop your forehead towards the floor.
- Stay in this posture for 6-8 breaths.
- Slowly come out of this posture by pressing back into child's pose, or by coming all the way down onto your belly on the floor.

Teaching and Practicing Seated Postures

Anchor



Benefits:

- Improves shoulder flexibility
- Opens chest
- Stimulates digestion
- Relieves headache and tension

Steps:

- Start sitting on heels
- Clasp hands behind the back with fingers interlaced
- Exhale, fold forward, reaching head forward as belly drops towards thighs
- Bring forehead towards mat
- Reach hands up and away from tailbone
- Breathe deeply through nose
- Stay in this position for 4-5 deep breaths
- On next inhale, slowly sit up, dropping hands behind back

Modifications:

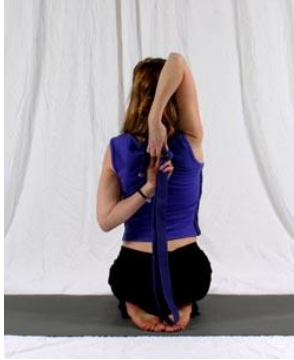
If students can not clasp their hands behind their back, give them a strap to hold between their hands, so they can work on bringing their hands closer together.

Teaching Points:

Remind students to reach forward with their head as they fold forward. This will help to lengthen their spine and help them fold from their hips, rather than rounding their back too much.

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Cow's Face (Gomukhasana)



Benefits:

- Improves shoulder flexibility
- Relieves tension in shoulders and upper back
- Improves posture

Steps:

- Start in kneeling position, sitting back on heels
- Reach right arm overhead, then bend right elbow, dropping hand down the back
- Exhale, bring left arm behind back, then reach left hand up the back towards the right hand
- Clasp hands together. If hands don't reach each other, use a strap to hold between the two hands
- Breathe deeply through the nose. Stay in this position 4-5 breaths
- Release hands
- Repeat on other side

Teaching Points:

Instruct students to slightly tuck the tailbone under to reduce any sway back that may occur. This will help reduce any strain on the low back. Also, instruct students to bring the top elbow as close to the back of the head as possible. This will help increase the stretch in the shoulders.

Teaching and Practicing Seated Postures

Easy Seated Position



Benefits:

- Improves hip flexibility
- Stretches the knees
- Brings awareness to posture

Steps:

- Start sitting with legs extended
- Bend the right knee, bringing the right foot in close to the body (to the point in the center of the hips), keeping the foot on the floor
- Bend the left knee, bringing the left foot just in front of the right foot, so the heels of both feet are lined up with each other
- Stay here and focus on breathing for 4-5 breaths
- Repeat on the other side

Variation:

From easy seated position, have students walk their hands forward, reaching forward with their head and chest. This will increase the stretch in the muscles in the back of the hip.

Teaching Points:

Some students with limited hip flexibility may find it uncomfortable sitting in a cross legged position. Have these students sit on a block or rolled blanket, with their sitting bones on the block/rolled blanket and their legs on the floor. Raising the hips while the legs remain crossed on the floor requires less hip flexibility than sitting on the floor with legs crossed. Eventually students can reduce the height of the prop (block/rolled blanket) and then eliminate it completely.

Also, it's important for students to switch sides, so each foot has a chance to be in the inside position. This helps bring balance to hip flexibility. Many students will have only practiced the cross legged position on one side and will have their favorite side. Encourage them to practice sitting cross legged with their other foot in close to bring more balance to their hip flexibility.

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Sun Worshipper



Benefits:

- Relieves tension in upper back
- Stretches shoulders and chest
- Opens throat and enhances breathing

Steps:

- Start sitting with legs crossed or sitting back on heels (from kneeling)
- Bring hands back, placing hands on the floor with fingertips pointing back
- Inhale, lift up through chest and squeeze shoulder blades together to open chest more
- Exhale, let head fall back
- Breathe deeply through nose
- Stay in this position for 4-5 deep breaths
- On inhale, relax shoulders, rolling them forward and lift head, coming back to starting position

Teaching Points:

Check that students' wrists are directly under their shoulders and that students keep squeezing shoulder blades and open through the chest. For any students with neck problems, have them look forward, rather than let the head fall back, but encourage them to still squeeze their shoulder blades together and lift up through the chest. This will allow them to still stretch the shoulders and chest and relieve upper back tension without compromising their neck.

Teaching and Practicing Seated Postures

Boat (Navasana)



Benefits:

- Builds core strength
- Improves balance, digestion and circulation
- Strengthens the legs, hips, abdomen and arms
- Improves posture

Steps:

- Start sitting with knees together and bent towards the ceiling and feet on the floor
- Place hands under thighs and draw shoulders back to open through chest
- Keep focus forward (not up or down)
- Lean back towards tailbone, while keeping chest open and shoulders back
- When ready, lift feet off floor
- Exhale, extend legs up and away from body
- Release hands from thighs, bringing hands to sides
- Stay in this position for 3-4 soft breaths
- Slowly come back down
- Counter with Cobbler's Pose, then with Inclined Plane

Variation



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This variation of Boat helps students to practice flexibility more than strength. To get into this pose, have students place their hands around the soles of their feet rather than place their hands under their thighs. As they exhale, they extend their legs, while still holding their feet.

Teaching Points:

Check that students keep their shoulders back and chest open. Many students have a tendency to round their backs as they attempt to keep their legs up.

Encourage students to continue holding under their thighs if necessary.

Remember to have students do Cobbler's pose after Boat. This brings the pelvis in the opposite position and stretches many of the muscles that were previously contracted in Boat Pose.

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Cobbler's Pose



Benefits:

- Opens hips
- Stretches muscles of the back and hips
- Relieves stress and tension

Steps:

- From sitting, bring soles of feet together
- Press feet forward until legs make a diamond shape
- Hold onto shins or ankles and pull shoulders back
- Exhale, fold forward, bringing chest towards feet
- Relax head and neck, and drop elbows out to the sides
- Stay in this position for 4-5 long, slow breaths
- Slowly raise head and chest and come back to sitting

Exploration:

Try Cobbler's Pose first with feet only out to the point where they are in line with the knees. As you fold forward, you'll notice more of a stretch in the inner thigh. Raise head and chest back to sitting. Then press your feet out a little further away from your body. As you fold forward, notice how the stretch changes. You will most likely now feel the stretch more in the back of the hips and back of the upper thigh. As you press your feet farther away, notice how the stretch is felt increasingly further down the back of the thigh.

Teaching Points:

Many students familiar with butterfly position automatically bring their feet in close. Remind students to press their feet forward to bring the stretch into their thighs. Also remind students to fold forward from the hips by pressing back through their sitting bones and tipping the pelvis forward rather than only rounding the back.

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Inclined Plane (Purvottanasana)



Benefits:

- Improves balance
- Opens chest, shoulders and throat
- Stretches the wrist, shoulders and ankle joints
- Increases arm strength and core strength
- Energizes the body

Steps:

- Start seated with legs together, knees straight and toes pointing forward
- Place hands behind back with fingers pointing either forward or back
- Inhale, lift up through chest, look up and squeeze shoulder blades together
- Exhale, press down through heels and lift hips as high as possible, allowing head to fall back
- Stay in this position for 3-4 deep breaths
- Slowly lower hips back to floor and look forward, coming back to sitting

Teaching Points:

Remind students to place hands directly under their shoulders before lifting hips. This will help reduce any strain on the wrists. Have students point their toes before lifting hips. This brings heels into the proper position, so heels remain stable during the lift. If a student has neck problems, they can keep looking forward, while still squeezing their shoulder blades together.

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Variation:

Table Top



The steps are the same as for Inclined Plane, but keep knees bent throughout the pose. This makes it easier to lift the hips and stay up.

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Seated Staff Pose (Dandasana)



Benefits:

- Tones abdominal muscles
- Opens the chest
- Stretches and strengthens the legs
- Strengthens the torso, arms and spine

Steps:

- Sit with your legs extended
- Sit up tall and scoot your sitting bones back, so you are sitting on the top of your sitting bones
- Bring your feet together and turn your legs, so your knees are facing directly up (not turned out to the sides)
- Press your hands into the floor as you reach up through the top of your head to lengthen your spine
- Flex your feet as much as possible, until you feel a stretch in your calves
- Breathe fully through your nose, staying in this position for 4-5 breaths

Modification:

Some students may find it places strain on their low back when sitting on the floor like this, due to tight hamstrings. Have those students place the edge of a blanket or rolled towel under their sitting bones. Raising the hips requires less hamstring flexibility than sitting all the way down on the floor. Eventually students can reduce the height of the blanket or towel and then eliminate it completely.

Teaching Points:

Remind students to keep their knees facing directly up towards the ceiling. The powerful external rotator muscles of the hip tend to cause the feet to turn out automatically when we're not paying attention. Keeping the knee facing up will help strengthen the muscles that internally rotate the hip.

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Seated Forward Fold (Paschimottanasana)



Benefits:

- Strengthens the spine
- Stretches the calves and hamstrings
- Improves digestion
- Stretches the low back

Steps:

- Start sitting with legs extended out in front of you
- Scoot back through the hips, so you are sitting on the front part of your sitting bones
- Place your hands at your sides and flex your feet (this is Dandasana – Staff Pose)
- Inhale, reach arms up to shoulder height (arms are about shoulder width apart with palms facing each other)
- Exhale, reach forward with arms, head and chest, as belly drops towards thighs
- Drop arms to either side of legs, relaxing elbows and shoulders
- Breathe deeply through the nose, focusing on the exhalation
- Stay in this position for 4-5 breaths
- Inhale, come back up to sitting
- Repeat one more time

Teaching Points:

In many yoga texts, you'll find this pose started with arms overhead instead of at shoulder height. Arms overhead is the traditional way to come into this pose, however placing the arms overhead places more weight on the back and can strain the back. Placing the arms at shoulder height eliminates this problem and requires less back strength to keep the back straight, rather than slouched.

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Many students desire to get their head to their legs – more than keeping proper alignment for a safe and beneficial stretch. Remind students to keep reaching forward with their head and chin as they press back through their sitting bones. This will help lengthen the spine and tilt the pelvis, so they are folding from the hip joints rather than rounding down from their back. Also, encourage students to bend their knees to start and slowly begin to straighten their legs once they are in position. This helps them bring their pelvis and back into proper position first and then focus on gradually developing more flexibility in their hamstrings.

Teaching and Practicing Seated Postures

Seated One-Leg Forward Fold (Janu Sirsasana)



Benefits:

- Stretches the calves, hamstrings and lower back muscles
- Improves digestion
- Strengthens low back
- Alleviates headache and stress

Steps:

- Start seated with legs extended
- Bend the left knee, placing the sole of the left foot next to the right thigh
- Scoot back, so you are on the front part of sitting bones
- Sit up tall
- Raise arms forward and up to shoulder height
- Exhale, reach forward, as belly drops toward thigh
- Keep reaching forward with head and chin, while pressing back through the hips
- Relax arms, shoulders and neck
- Breathe deeply through the nose, focusing on the exhalation, staying in this position for 4-5 breaths.
- Inhale, slowly come up to sitting
- Extend left leg next to right leg and shake out legs
- Repeat on the other side

Teaching Points:

Sitting forward bends with one foot tucked in are among the most useful hip flexibility stretches for beginning and intermediate students. They do not place as much stress on the lower back and sacroiliac joints as keeping both legs straight, and are helpful for working on right-left imbalances. However, many students are more concerned about getting their head to their leg, rather than maintaining proper alignment to create a more beneficial stretch. Remind students to keep their chin away from their chest and to press back through the hips. Keeping the chin away from the chest helps prevent the upper back from rounding too much. Pressing back through the hips helps tilt the pelvis, so students are bending from the hips rather than rounding from the back, which can strain the low back.

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Variation:

Seated One-Leg Side Bend (Parivrtta Janu Sirsasana)



Benefits:

- Stretches the calves, hamstrings and lower back muscles
- Stretches the sides of the body
- Improves digestion
- Strengthens low back

Steps:

- Start seated with legs extended
- Bend the left knee, placing the sole of the left foot next to the right thigh
- Scoot back, so you are on the front part of sitting bones
- Turn towards the left
- Inhale, reach left arm overhead
- Exhale, slide right hand down the right leg and lean to the right, while keeping the left arm next to the left ear
- Reach right hand around inside edge of the right foot and hold onto sole of the right foot
- Reach left hand around the outside edge of the right foot and hold onto the sole of the right foot
- Holding onto the foot with both hands and keeping arms next to ears, turn chest open to the side
- Breathe deeply through the nose, staying in this position for 4-5 breaths
- Inhale, release hands and slowly come back up to sitting
- From here, you place left hand on floor behind you and reach right hand back, as you lift up hips, for a counter pose. Then come back to sitting.
- Extend left leg next to right leg and shake out legs
- Repeat on other side

Modification:

Many students can't reach their hands to the foot of their extended leg while keeping their chest open to the side. Encourage them to simply slide their right hand down their right leg towards their foot, while reaching up and right with their left hand.

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Seated One Leg Bind (from Janu Sirsasana)



From Janu Sirsasana, come back up. Bring the foot that is next to the thigh, to the space on top of the thigh. Turn towards the bent knee, and reach behind your back with your other hand to hold onto your foot.

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Seated Forward Fold – One Knee Up (Marichyasana)



Benefits:

- Tones abdominal muscles
- Stimulates digestion
- Strengthens and stretches the legs and shoulders
- Opens chest and shoulders

Steps:

- Start in Dandasana
- Press your hands down into the floor to lengthen your spine
- Bend your left knee, placing your left foot next to your right thigh
- Distribute your weight evenly between your sitting bones
- Inhale, reach your arms up to shoulder height (photo 2) with both arms to the right of the left knee
- Exhale, stretch your arms and head forward
- Reach your left arm around the front of your left leg (left arm pit next to left shin) and bring your left hand towards your back
- Reach right hand behind your back
- Clasp hands together behind your back
- Reach your chin towards your knee

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- Breathe softly through your nose
- Stay in this position for 4-5 breaths
- Inhale, release arms and come back up to sitting
- Extend left leg next to right leg
- Repeat on other side (bending right knee)

Counter with Inclined Plane



Inclined plane helps to stretch and strengthen the opposing muscles of Marichyasana.

Teaching and Practicing Seated Postures

Heron (Krounchasana)



Benefits:

- Stretches the shoulders, back and hamstrings
- Improves digestion
- Relieves backache and fatigue

Steps:

- Start sitting with your legs extended in front of you
- Bend your left knee, placing your left foot next to the inside of your right thigh
- Bend your right knee, bringing your right foot in close and wrapping your hands around the sole of your right foot
- Inhale, sit up tall, reaching up through the top of your head to lengthen your spine
- Exhale, extend your right leg, reaching the sole of your right foot up towards the ceiling
- Focus on a point directly in front of you and focus on your breath, making it smooth and even
- Stay in this position for 3-4 breaths
- Exhale, bend your right knee and place your right foot back on the floor
- Repeat on the other side

Teaching Points:

Students often round their backs a lot in an attempt to bring their head to their raised leg. Remind students to keep reaching up through the top of their head to lengthen their spine and to focus on only moving their raised leg, bringing their shin towards their chin, rather than moving their torso.

Teaching and Practicing Seated Postures

Splits (Hanumanasana)



Benefits:

- Opens the hips
- Stretches the hamstrings
- Improves circulation
- Tones the legs
- Improves balance

Steps:

- Start on all fours (hands and knees)
- Bring right foot forward, placing right foot between the hands
- Press left foot back until left leg is straight (lunge position)
- Flex right foot and slowly begin to press right foot forward, dropping hips towards the floor
- Stop at any point that the stretch becomes uncomfortable
- Stay in this position for 4-6 slow breaths, breathing through the nose and focusing on one point in front of you
- Begin to bend knees and raise hips, coming back to lunge position
- Bring right foot back next to left foot, coming back to all fours
- Repeat splits on the other side

Teaching Points:

The full splits position is not advisable for many students due to lack of flexibility in the hips, psoas and hamstring muscles. Due to having the body weight over the legs in this position, it's important for students to be completely warmed up and to go slow when trying this position. Remind students to back off slightly when they feel any discomfort and let their muscles relax by using slow deep breathing. Students can slowly come into the position, backing off slightly when they feel discomfort, then going to their edge again. This is a good pose for helping students learn to listen to their body and increase their body awareness, while also learning to play with their "edge", as discussed in part 1 of this manual.

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Modification:



To modify splits have students bend the front knee to reduce the stretch in the hamstring muscles of the front leg and the hip extensor muscles of the back leg.

Students can also modify this posture by practicing it over a bolster. Place a bolster horizontally across your mat. Sit on the bolster in a hurdler's position (one leg forward and the other bent with your foot near your bottom and the knee out to the side). Begin to straighten the back leg as you square your hips forward. The bolster will support you without having to go completely into the splits position.

Variation:

Splits with arms overhead



This variation places more weight over the hips, so students should be careful coming into this position, bringing hands back to the floor at the first sign of strain in their hips or legs.

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Lotus (Padmasana)



Benefits:

- Opens the hips
- Increases knee flexibility
- Improves posture

Steps:

- Start sitting in Staff Pose (Dandasana)
- Bring your right heel towards your navel
- Externally rotate your leg and foot and place the top of your right foot on your left thigh at the hip crease (the sole of your right foot faces up towards the ceiling)
- Bring your left heel towards your navel, rotate your leg and foot and place the top of your left foot on your right thigh near the hip crease
- Place your hands on your thighs or at your sides
- Inhale deeply and extend from your low belly up through the top of your head
- Lengthen up through the sides of your body and draw your shoulders back
- Close your eyes and focus on your breath, breathing slowly through your nose
- Stay in this position for 4-5 breaths
- Use your hands to gently remove your left foot from your right thigh and then remove your right foot from the left thigh
- Shake out your legs
- Repeat on the other side

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Modified Lotus (Half Lotus)



Follow the steps of lotus, but only place one foot on the opposite thigh. The second foot remains on the floor.

Teaching Points:

Have all students come into half lotus or easy sitting position first. If this is a challenge for them, have them stop at that point, so they can focus on their breath and relax into the pose. If students do half lotus on one side, have them practice half lotus on the other side, regardless of differences in flexibility. Treating each side the same will help develop balance between the two sides.

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Seated Twist (Bharadvajasana)



Benefits:

- Opens the chest and shoulders
- Stretches the muscles surrounding the hips
- Improves spinal flexibility
- Stimulates digestion

Steps:

- Start sitting
- Bend left knee, placing left foot next to right sitting bone
- Bend right knee, placing right foot to the outside of the left knee
- Place right hand just behind right hip
- Wrap left arm around right knee, hugging right thigh in close to body
- Make sure that the sitting bones on both sides are still pressing down into the floor.
- Inhale, sit up tall
- Exhale, twist to the right and look over the right shoulder
- On every inhale, sit a little taller. On every exhale, twist a little deeper
- Work into this position for 3-4 breaths
- Turn back to center and release left arm
- Extend both legs out
- Repeat on the other side

Teaching Points:

It's easy for students to simply hang out in this position. Encourage students to actively work into this position by continually stretching up as they inhale and twisting more as they exhale. Also, remind students to hug their top leg close to their chest and to keep both sitting bones on the floor. This will help increase the stretch to the hip rotator muscles.

Teaching and Practicing Seated Postures

Variation:

Seated Twist with Bind



Steps:

- Start in seated twist (with right leg on top)
- Bring left arm in front of right leg
- Thread the left arm through the hole between the two legs
- Bring the right hand behind the back and clasp the two hands together
- Inhale, sit up tall
- Exhale, twist more to the right, looking over the right shoulder

Modification:

Half Seated Twist (one leg)



In this modification, the left leg (bottom leg) stays straight while the right leg crosses over. Wrap the left arm around the right leg and twist to the right. It follows the same steps as the full twist with the only change being the extended (instead of bent) bottom leg. This makes the twist easier, requiring less hip flexibility.

Counter Pose:



Twist to the other side and lower your chest towards the floor.

Teaching and Practicing Seated Postures

Seated Straddle/Open Angle (Upavistha Konasana)



Benefits:

- Opens the hips and groin
- Stretches the hamstrings, calves and inner thighs
- Strengthens the low back
- Lengthens the spine

Steps:

- Sit with legs extended
- Widen your legs and rotate them slightly inward, so your feet and knees point straight up
- Bring your hands behind your back
- Press down through your hands and slightly lift your hips, then press back through your hips, tilting your pelvis forward, so that as you sit back down you are now sitting on the front of your sitting bones
- Lift up through the top of your head and lengthen your spine
- With your arms still behind you, squeeze your shoulder blades together and look up slightly
- Breathe deeply through your nose, opening more through your chest
- You can stay here, or inhale, bring your hands in front of you, being careful to keep your shoulders back and chest lifted
- Exhale, reach forward with your head and chest, keeping your hands no further away from you than your shoulders
- If you feel your shoulders begin to round, stop at that point, draw your shoulders back and breathe here
- If you can keep your back fairly flat, drop your forearms to the floor and allow your forearms to help support your weight
- Stay in this position for 4-6 breaths, breathing deeply through your nose and focusing on the exhalations
- Use your hands to press against the floor and lift your torso back up to sitting
- Slowly bring your legs together and shake your legs

Teaching and Practicing Seated Postures

Teaching Points:

Proper alignment is most important in this pose. Often beginning students allow their knees to roll outward or backward. This action stretches the hamstrings unevenly and causes students to sit back towards their tailbone and round their lower back. Remind your students to keep kneecaps pointing to the ceiling.

It is critical that your students understand the need to bend forward from the hips/pelvis and not from the lower back. Often students have a desire to try to touch their head to the floor, no matter what the cost to their lumbar spine. This can create strain on the inter-vertebral discs and other soft tissue surrounding the spine. Make sure that your students start their straddle position sitting on the front part of their sitting bones to tip the pelvis forward before starting the forward fold. Also, remind them to press back through their sitting bones and tailbone as they fold forward, while reaching their head forward (rather than dropping their head down), keeping their chin away from chest. Finally, only tip slightly forward yourself, showing your students that it's more important to have proper alignment than to worry about how far down you can go. Encourage students to close their eyes and focus on their slow deep breath, so they can focus on the feelings of the stretch and on relaxing their muscles.

Variation:

Side Straddle



Benefits:

- Opens the hips and groin
- Stretches the hamstrings, calves and inner thighs
- Strengthens the low back
- Lengthens the spine
- Stretches the sides of the body

Steps:

- From a seated straddle (sitting upright), place left hand on the inside of the right thigh

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- Inhale, reach right arm overhead, placing arm next to ear
- Exhale, reach the right hand to the left, while keeping the chest open to the front and the left hand next to the right thigh
- If your right hand reaches the left foot (with the chest staying open to the front), hold onto the left foot
- Draw the right shoulder back to open the chest more
- Breathe deeply through the nose
- Stay in this position for 4-5 breaths
- Inhale, release your foot and come back up to sitting
- Repeat on the other side
- Bring legs together and shake them out

Teaching Points:

Students often turn their chest towards the floor in this side stretch in order to get their torso closer to their leg. Encourage students to simply reach in the direction of their foot while maintaining an open chest to the front. Have them focus on one point in front of them and imagine a straight line from their heart to that focal point. Have them focus on rotating the upper shoulder back and opening the chest more, and have them focus on the feeling of the stretch, trying to bring more stretch into the side of the body, rather than focusing on the look of the pose.

Teaching and Practicing Seated Postures

Butterfly



Benefits:

- Opens hips
- Stretches muscles of the back and hips
- Relieves stress and tension
- Improves posture

Steps:

- From sitting, bring soles of feet together
- Bring heels in towards your body
- Interlace your fingers and wrap your hands around your feet
- Inhale, pull against your feet and sit up tall
- Exhale, drop your knees towards the floor
- Continue to sit up tall as you inhale, and drop your knees as you exhale for the next 4-5 breaths
- On your next exhale, reach your chest forward and slowly fold forward.
- Stay in this position for 4-5 breaths
- On your next inhale, slowly raise head and chest and come back to sitting

Teaching and Practicing Seated Postures

Turtle (Kurmasana)



Benefits:

- Stretches the legs, hips, back and shoulders
- Relieves tension in neck and upper back
- Strengthens the legs
- Works abdominal muscles and improves digestion

Steps:

- Start seated with knees bent and feet on the floor about hip width apart
- Bend elbows, bringing hands up next to sides with palms facing out
- Inhale, sit up tall
- Exhale, reach head and chest forward, as you drop the tops of the hands to the floor between the legs with your fingertips pointing behind you
- Begin pressing your hands under your legs and behind you with palms up
- Bring hands behind the back, clasping hands behind the back
- Bring feet towards each other and drop head towards feet
- Breathe softly in this position, staying in this position for 4-5 breaths
- To come out of the pose, release hands and press down with hands to come back to sitting

Teaching Points:

Many students will have a difficult time clasping their hands behind their backs. Have them focus on simply reaching back with their hands, as they press back through their hips and reach forward with their head. This will help them to lengthen the spine and go further into the stretch.

Teaching and Practicing Seated Postures

Hero (Virasana)



Benefits:

- Stretches the hip, knee and ankle joints
- Relieves low back discomfort
- Improves posture

Steps:

- Start in a kneeling position with knees about hip width apart and feet slightly wider
- Keep tops of the feet on the floor as you slowly sit down, sitting between your two feet
- Reach up through the top of your head as you sit, lengthening through the spine
- Focus on a point in front of you and on your breath, making your breath smooth and even
- Stay in this position for 4-5 breaths
- To come out of this position, place hands in front of you, coming onto all fours
- Lift feet off the floor (so only hands and knees are on the floor) and rotate ankles to bring more circulation back to that area
- Counter with down dog to stretch out the backs of the legs

Teaching Points:

This posture can cause too much strain on the knee joint for many students. To modify this posture, have students sit on a bolster, with the bolster running long ways between their legs. If you don't have a bolster, students can also sit on a block or a rolled blanket.

Teaching and Practicing Seated Postures

Knee to Knee Forward Fold



Benefits:

- Stretches the knees and thighs
- Improves flexibility of the hips

Steps:

- Start seated
- Bend your left knee and place your left on the floor next to your right sitting bone and hip.
- Bend your right knee and stack your right knee on top of your left knee
- Place your hands on top of your feet and press down
- Inhale, sit up tall
- Exhale, begin folding forward, bringing your belly and chest towards your knees
- Stay in this position for 4-6 breaths, dropping down further with each exhale
- Slowly come back up to sitting
- Extend both legs in front of you and shake your legs out
- Repeat on the other side

Teaching and Practicing Seated Postures

Prayer Squat (Malasana)



Benefits:

- Opens the hips (stretches the gracilis, vastus lateralis, vastus intermedialis, vastus medialis)
- Relieves sciatica
- Improves balance
- Strengthens the arches of the feet and the ankles, stretches the ankle joint
- Alleviates low back pain
- Helps relieve constipation

Steps:

- Start standing with feet a little wider than hip width apart and turned out
- With hands on your hips or out in front of you, squat down keeping your hips off the floor
- Bring hands to heart and use elbows to press knees farther apart
- Keep heels pressing into or towards the floor
- Drop head and press thumbs against forehead to encourage relaxation
- Stay in this position for 5-6 long, slow breaths
- Sit down when done and shake legs out

Modification:

For students who have difficulty squatting fully, they can squat only half way down with a wall behind their back for support. Students can also practice Cobbler's Pose instead (see later in this section) to open the hips without having to bend the knees as far.

Teaching Points:

Many students will keep their heels raised due to less flexibility in ankle joint. Encourage students to gently press down through their heels to help stretch and improve flexibility in this area.

Teaching and Practicing Seated Postures

Variation:



In this twisting variation, bring one arm in front of your shin and the other arm behind your back. Clasp your hands together and twist to the side.

Teaching and Practicing Seated Postures

Samples of a Seated Sequence

Sample #1

Down Dog, Pigeon (right knee forward)

Down Dog, Pigeon (left knee forward)

Child's Pose

Sun Worshipper

Boat

Cobbler's Pose

Inclined Plane

Sample #2

Dandasana (Seated Staff Pose)

Janu Sirsasana, Seated Twist (right leg straight for both)

Janu Sirsasana, Seated Twist (left leg straight for both)

Table Top

Cobbler's Pose

Turtle

Create Your Own Seated Sequence – Using 5-6 postures

Teaching and Practicing Seated Postures

Review Questions for Teaching and Practicing Seated Postures

- 1) In what part of a practice is it best to include seated postures? (before/after which types of postures)?
- 2) What are the benefits of Pigeon? What is a modification that can be used for people with knee problems?
- 3) What are the benefits of anchor posture and what are some teaching points to consider?
- 4) Why should you instruct students to tuck the tailbone under when sitting on their heels, such as in cow's face?
- 5) Why should students practice easy seated position by switching the foot that is inside?
- 6) Name a counter pose that students can do after boat pose? Why is this a good counter pose?
- 7) What are some instructions you can give students in seated forward folds (janu sirsasana, paschimottanasana) so they fold at the hip rather than rounding too much in the back?
- 8) What are the benefits of a seated twist? How can you get students to more actively work in this position? What are some variations of the seated twist?
- 9) What are the benefits of Malasana (squat)? What are some modifications for students who have difficulty squatting?
- 10) Create a sequence of 5-6 seated postures that flow well together and move the spine in different directions.