

Movement Practices for Meditators



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What this is for

Meditation comes with a raft of hazy, often unspoken, rules. Many of us carry images of sitting straight-backed in full lotus on a tiny cushion for hours and hours, earnestly enduring the pain of aching knees, hips, back, and neck. We're certain there must be something good about this. 'Keep a straight spine', 'tuck your chin in', 'feel like a thread pulls you up from the top of your head', 'face directly front', 'don't move', 'sit through the pain'; these admonitions and more float about alongside 'no pain - no gain' and 'feel the burn'.

I propose to you that this is mostly nonsense and has very little to do with the intention of meditation. Much is distorted on the journey from east to west.

'Everything changes, nothing stays the same' includes you and your body as you sit in meditation. Imposing an external form and ignoring the constant changes that arise in you as you sit in meditation leaves you primarily meditating on the disparity between what actually is and your ideas about what ought to be. This is where pain and suffering comes from. Why practice it? Most of us are already rather good at it.

Every moment of every day emotions and thoughts come up one after another and our physical configuration constantly changes in response to what arises. With intense emotions and stress our spines torque and bend. If we 'go with' these torques and bends, allow them to be, they come and go. If we ignore them or oppose them and maintain the posture we've learned is 'correct' they come and stay. The same happens in meditation - there are constant small shifts, bends, torques that happen, we're constantly in motion. Yet we've learned we ought to be 'still like the mountain', so those torques and bends settle in and result in spasming muscles, tight necks, sore knees, and sometimes long lasting injuries. These are a result of resting in conceptions of what ought to be rather than resting in what is. Subtle as it sometimes is, we are in constant motion.

What follows are a series of short movement practices to give you an opportunity to explore more deeply movements and actions you do every day. Most of these actions are present in everything you do. Reminding yourself of these possibilities can help you learn to rest in what is while doing sitting or walking meditations so you can become more aware of your actual experience. Doing these practices will also serve to bring into your awareness the unconscious rules you carry about how to sit, stand, walk - and be.

At the end of this booklet there are suggestions of recorded Awareness Through Movement® lessons you can download from jjbickford.com if you wish to explore further.

“The object of this learning is to remove outside authority from your inner life.”
- Moshe Feldenkrais, 1977

How to do the movement practices

Do the movements with ease, a bit lazy, no strain. **This is Important!!**

Don't stretch.

Don't go to your limits.

Don't push.

Stay within your range of ease.

The intention is learning, not mindless repetition to 'get stronger' or 'more flexible'. Strength and flexibility arise from moving well.

Learning happens with noticing what happens and responding to it. Don't just repeat something over and over - change how you do it each time. Make small changes, changes of focus, of timing, of what parts of yourself participate or 'get out of the way'.

Let your attention be soft; receive sensory experience rather than 'reaching for it'.

Learn to recognize when you need to pause or rest or change your approach. Stop before you feel tired, bored or distracted. Take a small rest, a change of internal scene; then continue.

Notice what you experience - sensations, feelings, thoughts - everything you experience is part of the lesson. Sometimes you may feel very good, other times frustrated, convinced the instructions are completely unclear - just notice and do what you understand.

Notice the unconscious rules you follow - are they useful for your present intention?

These are practices. The results can be magical, but the magic must be applied and generalized. Apply your new experience in different situations - standing, sitting, talking, walking, at the computer, reading.

breathing & shape flow

Do this sitting on a chair, stool, or cushion - whichever is the most comfortable and affords you movement - or lying on your back.

Breathe normally - do not deep breathe!

First, just imagine this vividly. Imagine that as you inhale, you fill up every cell in yourself, as well as the space between, so that you expand. As you exhale, imagine that each cell empties, shrinks a little, the space as well, so you grow smaller.

Now try it out, letting your body be moved by your breathe. Gently inhale, filling your cells and the spaces between, then breathe out, emptying the cells and spaces between and becoming smaller. Let your whole self move as you do this.

Now gradually decrease how much you move in space until someone watching might not be able to tell you are moving. Shift your attention to noticing how different parts of your internal landscape shift and move with your breaths. You might notice that it's not even or uniform; it shifts and changes asymmetrically throughout you. Gradually let that get smaller, but keep a sense of how the shape that is you is continually changing with each breath, even each thought and feeling. Allow the movement that is always there, even in stillness, to support you.

flexion & extension

Do this sitting on a chair, stool, or cushion - whichever is the most comfortable and affords you movement. Think of the top of your head as being one end of your spine, your tailbone as the other.

Sit upright, spine neutral (i.e. extended, but with the natural curves in your lower back, middle back, and neck).

Roll the top of your pelvis back, so your belly button moves backwards, as you look down towards the floor, rounding your whole back into a long 'C'. Then roll your pelvis forward again and return to your neutral. Repeat several times more, adding an exhale as you round back, inhaling as you return. Let your spine lengthen into the 'C', rather than scrunching down.

Be sure that your chest is moving as you do this.

Then, from neutral, gently roll your pelvis forward, letting your belly and chest move forward, looking up a little bit as your chest lifts a little forward and up to arch your whole back. Be sure you distribute the arch through your whole back so you don't just crease in your lower back! Add an inhale as you arch your back and look up.

Now roll your pelvis back as you exhale and round your spine to the back; roll your pelvis forwards as you inhale and arch to the front. Keep it easy, keep it small.
Remember, the purpose is not to stretch.

A variation: next time you round your back, pause there and gently tip your head to look down and up several times. Gently. Small movements. Then return to rounding your whole spine back and returning to neutral. Now roll your pelvis to arch your spine, pause, gently tip your head forward and back. Return to rounding your spine forwards and back.

A further differentiation: sit comfortably with a neutral spine. With eyes closed, gently roll your eyes up and down. Tiny, an 1/16th of an inch! Slow enough that you can notice if you're doing it smoothly. If it doesn't seem smooth, notice the jumps and starts. What can you release to let your eyes roll smoothly? Rest a moment. Then gently roll your eyes up and down as you roll your pelvis to round and arch your back. Do this slowly, much smaller. Don't push through resistance; go slow enough that you can explore what to let go of to make it easy.

side bending

Do this sitting on a chair, stool, or cushion - whichever is the most comfortable and affords you movement.

Tilt your head a little to one side, as if cocking your head to listen, your ear going towards your shoulder. Return, then go to the other side. Notice which direction is easiest.

Tilt your head to the easy side, return. Repeat this several times. Notice what the rest of your self does, or can do, to make that easier.

Now add tilting your shoulder down to that side along with your head. What do you do with your spine and ribs?

Sit in neutral. Slip your hand under the same hip as you were tilting your head towards (you might notice a little bone there - this is one of your 'sit' bones). Gently lift up, so you bring that sit bone up off the chair, tilting your pelvis to the other side. You'll notice right off that unless you help a bit by bending your back to the side your arm is not strong enough to lift your pelvis by itself. As you do this, what do your ribs do? Your spine? You might notice that the same side shoulder begins to drop down as your hip lifts up. How about your head?

Now remove your hand and lift the same sit bone as you tilt your head and shoulder towards it. Voila! Side bend! Each time you repeat it keep spreading out the work so your whole spine is involved and your ribs are moving - even under your arm pits.

Try it on the other side. Start gentle, small.

Now sit with both sit bones touching. Gently bend to one side then the other, letting your whole spine, head, and pelvis be involved. Then let your sit bones stay sitting evenly and tilt side to side from your head letting your shoulders and whole spine bend first to one side, then the other.

A variation: bend to one side, pause there, and gently tilt your head the opposite way several times. Stay in your range of ease. How can you make this easier? What moves? Noticing you are creating and 'S' curve in your spine.

letting your spine unwind

The most important part of this is to notice how far you can go with ease, how far you can go before there's resistance. Don't push through it; find out what you can let go of to allow you to move with ease. (hmmm, does this sound like what you run into when meditating?)

Sit comfortably, neutral spine. Close your eyes. Feel your eyes resting in their sockets.

Gently roll your eyes to one side, then the other. Repeat this several times.

Open your eyes, and turn your head to look first to one side, then the other.

Turn your head to one side and pause there. Roll your eyes side to side, gently. Return to turning your head side to side.

Turn your head to the other side and pause there. Roll your eyes side to side, gently. Return to turning your head side to side.

Now turn your head to the left, pause, look to the left, and leave your eyes looking to the left as you turn your head gently to the right a bit, then return, maintaining the look to the left. Repeat. Keep it small.

Try it to the other side.

Relax your eyes and turn your head to one side, letting your shoulders go along so the twist moves further down your spine. How far down your spine do you notice yourself twisting? Try it to one side a few times, then the other.

Turn head and shoulders to the right, pause there, and turn just your head back to center. Now turn your head to the right as your bring your shoulders back to center. Do this several times, rotating your head the opposite direction you're turning your shoulders and spine. (if you wish, you can add your eyes - either looking the direction your head is turning or the direction your shoulders are turning) Keep it easy. Try it to the other side.

| Look side to side; what it is like now?

If you're meditating and feel continual discomfort in spine or neck, lift your hands and allow yourself to twist in the direction your spine wants to go. Let yourself be there. In a few moments you might notice you've 'unwound', and the discomfort is gone. You can try the same thing if you have knee pain - often it originates in a torque in your spine you are resisting.

jaws

Sit or lie on your back comfortably. Let your mouth open and close, just a little, with the greatest of ease.

Now place one fingertip on your chin. Keep your jaw where it is as you tip your head backwards, opening your mouth, then return. Keep it easy. Rest your head and just open and close your jaw again.

Let your lower jaw open a little. Leave it open and slide it a little forward, then back. Let your head move if you wish

Let your lower jaw open a little. Leave it open and gently slide your lower jaw side to side. Ease. Again, finger tip on your chin, keep your lower jaw where it is as you turn your head side to side. Let go of whatever prevents ease of motion. Return to sliding jaw side to side.

You can add differentiation of your eyes if you wish, rolling your eyes one way as you slide your jaw the other way. Or, if you're keeping your lower jaw in place and moving your head, let your eyes move the direction of your jaw. Keep it very easy, soft, no pushing. A little bit goes a very long way with your jaw.

walking

Stand easily, feet a comfortable width apart.

Bend your knees a tiny bit, just a breath behind the knees, and tip the top of your pelvis forward a little, so you increase the arch in your back, then tip it back a little, so your lower back flattens. Find a comfortable place in between for your pelvis to be, so you have some forward curve in your lumbar spine. Let your dan tien area soften forward and down a little - not just 'hanging out', keeping a little tone, but not 'sucking it up' either. Let your head sit comfortably on your spine, eyes oriented to the horizon.

Begin to walk with easy, small steps. If you need to look down, just let your eyes roll down; no need to tilt your head down. Let your whole self be a little loose, so as you step there is movement in your spine and hips. Let your backbone walk you, rather than making your legs do all the work. Let your hips move, a little side to side, pelvis tipping forward and back. Don't make movement happen; intend to go forward and let your whole self move freely.

As you walk, feel your feet as they pass over the ground. How much pressure do they have? Do they roll through softly or clump along? Do your feet feel as if they can carry the weight of you? Do you trust them to do so?

Bring your attention to your 'pelvic floor' - that's what you sit on. It's still there, as you stand and walk. How is the floor of your pelvis moving as it carries the rest of you through space?

Walk so you can breathe easily, feeling movement all through yourself, letting your mouth, jaw, and tongue be soft and relaxed, allowing your sternum to move freely, as well as your ribs.

If you're walking slowly, let it be a slow-motion sashay. There's no need to bind yourself up just to go slowly; slowing down can allow you to flow freely.

If you're walking quickly, allow your whole body to move freely, just let the range of movement be a little smaller. No need to bind up just to move quickly - release into the direction you are going.

camera eyes - searchlight eyes

This practice is from the booklet "Seeing with Magical Eyes"

Remove your contacts or glasses if you wear them and walk around and notice what it's like to look at things. Notice what you feel around your jaw, neck and throat, chest, pelvis, and feet; in your breathing; and in and around your eyes as you look. Notice how you see; where does seeing happen? Not from a scientific view, in your experience.

Lay on your back comfortably. Imagine you are the sun or a starfish, and as you inhale, 'radiate out' - extend your body outward, gently; not stretching, just extending. Then when you exhale, let everything relax back towards the center. Try this a few times.

Now bring your attention to your eyes. Let them rest in their sockets, giving in to gravity. With each exhale, let them relax a little more.

Look at something directly above you. Let your vision radiate out to it, let your 'seeing' flow out through your relaxed eyes so you 'shine a light' on what you see - as if your eyes are searchlights, shining into the night. Give this a try, then let it go. Then try it again, this time inhaling as you send your seeing out, exhaling as you relax it. Notice what you feel as you do this and where you feel it.

Then let the image of what you see 'fall into your eyes'; let it fall through your eyes, receive it deep in the center of your head, without making any effort. Like a camera, let the light flow in through your eyes to the center of your head. Notice what this is like, how it effects your breathing, the feeling in and around your eyes, your neck, jaw, chest, and spine. Try it a few times - let what you see come into you, softly.

Spend a little time practicing these two ways of seeing. Don't try to 'get it right', just try them on. As you notice how each of these ways of seeing feels, also notice if different emotions come up. Just notice; no need to do anything with them if they do arise.

Come to your feet and try each of these ways of seeing while standing, looking at different objects. Try it as you walk around.

Practice moving though the world with camera eyes or searchlight eyes in everyday situations, just for a moment or two from time to time. With camera eyes in particular, go slow, you are literally experiencing your visual world as if it is inside yourself. This may be startling, or threatening in some situations. It might also prove to be very calming.

differentiating eyes, neck, and torso

This practice is from the booklet "Seeing with Magical Eyes"

Sit or stand comfortably. Turn your head gently to one side, then to the other, letting your eyes relax and do whatever they do. What do you notice - in your neck, jaw, upper back?

Now nod your head up and down, like nodding 'yes'. Notice.

Then keep your head still and roll your eyes to one side then the other - slowly and gently. Now up and down. Of course, only go as far as you can go without strain - that means with no hitches, tightness, or stretching. Your skill is what is important here, not dumb will.

Now look at your finger while you hold it directly in front of your eyes, 6" or a foot away. Continue looking at your finger and gently turn your head a little to one side, then return - do this a few times. Then turn your head to the other side and return a few times. Then turn your head from side to side, keeping your eyes looking directly ahead at your finger. (How are you looking? With camera or searchlight eyes? What is the pressure of your gaze?)

Notice you are moving your head around your eyes. How is this different than moving your eyes in your head?

Try a similar experiment, but move your head up and down, like softly nodding 'yes'. Eyes still gazing at your finger.

Then draw a circle with your nose in the space in front of you while continuing to look at your finger. Move slowly. Make the circle smooth and round. Are you able to do this and breathe easily at the same time? What happens if you soften in your chest as you do it? If you let your jaw relax, your tongue; if you soften your eyes?

Return to just turning your eyes and head from side to side, keeping it easy. Notice which direction you prefer to turn your head. Next time you turn your head, add turning your shoulders and torso the same direction. Try this several times. Then turn your head, shoulders and torso to the side and pause there. Keeping your shoulders and torso where they are, gently turn your head back towards center, then return to the side. Do this several times. Bring everything back to center then turn to look again. Is it any different? Try this to the other side if you wish.

Let that go and walk around a little. Stop and turn your head to look to one side, then look to the other side. What do you notice as you do this? How do you feel in your neck, chest, back, and eyes? Return to walking, occasionally looking to one side or the other. Notice.

global attention - pinpoint attention

This practice is from the booklet "Seeing with Magical Eyes"

Stand with a little space around you, with your feet wider than you might usually put them. Expand yourself in all directions - like that starfish in the earlier lesson. Reach out with your arms and ribs and up with the top of your head while you reach down with your feet; let your whole self spread wide. Then gather yourself in towards the middle or center of yourself; get narrow. Then alternate, spreading wide then gathering in. Notice your breathing, how you feel throughout yourself - what's it like to spread wide? To get narrow? Which seems more familiar?.

Do the same with your vision. Let your attention widen to take in your whole visual field. See globally. Then narrow your focus, pinpoint your focus down to an object in that field. (An easy way to work up to this is to 'set a frame' - use something like a window as a frame and let what is in that frame be your visual field.) Alternate seeing with global attention and pinpoint attention. Again, what it is like to see globally? To pinpoint your focus? Which seems more like how you normally go through the world? Is either one the 'right' way to see, or is each useful in particular circumstances?

You can use global focus and pinpoint focus with what you hear and feel as well. Try hearing all the sounds in your environment. Let them all be in your attention. What is this like? Then narrow your attention to just one sound (say, that dog barking every time you sit to meditate). What is that like? In your breathing, your sense of ease?

As you sit, sense your whole self sitting. Then narrow your focus to your neck, jaw, or lower back. Move back and forth. What do you notice? How often does your attention get held in a pinpointed focus?

Walk and try both ways of attending to seeing, feeling and hearing. When is it useful to sense globally? When is it useful to sense with pinpointed attention.

Attention needs to move back and forth; if it gets locked into one way of experiencing, fatigue sets in, and frequently your mind begins to run.

some suggestions for sitting meditation

Find a way to sit that allows you to be self supporting and that allows you to rest. This could be sitting in a chair, it could be kneeling in warrior pose on a bench or cushion, it could be sitting cross legged on a cushion, or if you are organized for it, perhaps you can rest in half or full lotus sitting on the floor. None of these are better than any other.

The main principle is learning how to be vertical with the least amount of effort and without pain. (Try operating from the principle that pain is an indication that you are ignoring something.) Forget what you've been told to do and experiment to discover what works for you. Let your own experience be your guide.

Some principles to experiment with:

- In any position, notice your base, where you meet the ground. 'Pelvic floor' describes the diamond formed by your two sit bones (the bones you can feel if you sit on a hard chair), your pubic bone, and your tail bone. You can experiment with what happens when you tip forward towards your pubic bone, or back towards your tailbone, or over to one or the other sit bones. Notice what happens in the rest of you.
- Let the ground hold you up. Let the organization of your bones hold you up.
- Distribute effort. In other words, if you tip forward towards your pubic bone, let that shift be reflected in your whole self, particularly in your spine, chest, belly, head, and shoulders. If you are walking, let your whole body move, not just your legs.
- If you are consciously engaging muscles to maintain a position it's probably not a good position to be in. Suck in your stomach; what happens to your breathing? Reach the top of your head up - what happens? Are your hamstrings (the back of your thighs) or quadriceps (the front of your thighs) working to hold you up? Are you straining in the muscles of your back to stay upright on that cushion? Notice, and adjust - find a way to sit that requires little effort.
- Meet yourself where you are.
- Consider not treating yourself as your enemy, or a project.
- Pay attention to what actually is. If your spine is twisting or bending, let it. If your shoulders are lifting, help them up for awhile. If your chest is retreating back and down, retreat! If your breathing is shallow, breathe shallow and notice what it is like. If your belly or jaw or legs or back is tight, pay attention. What is the function they are trying to fulfill: is your belly pulling in to help you

avoid certain feelings? are you biting down to suppress anger, or to bite someone's head off? is your back tight because you are fighting against a desire to slump to the floor? Do the action you are already doing, but do it more completely, more distributed, with greater ease, then come back to your intention in your practice.

the movement supporting stillness

As you sit, notice that even when you seem still there is movement. Notice how your breathing causes a continual subtle shifting of your 'insides'. Allow the curves in your spine to change, with tiny tilts to one side, little twists, flexions and extensions. Let your sternum drop inwards, or float forward and up. Everything about us is changing all the time. Let it be. Be patient with what you are.

Awareness Through Movement® Lessons you may find useful

These can be downloaded at jjbickford.com, 'booklets and audio lessons'.

breathing & shape flow

Radial Breathing
SeeSaw Breathing

flexion & extension

Potent Flexion
Head to Knee with Pushup Arm
Preparation for Crawling

side bending

Hips and Trunk
Returning Movement to the Base of Your Neck

letting your spine unwind

Tilting Bent Legs with Triangle arms
Returning Movement to Your Sternum
Eyes, Neck, and Pelvis

jaws

The Relationship of Jaws, Neck, Tongue, and Pelvis

walking

Frog Legs
Sexy Legs
Standing on Crossed Legs

camera eyes - searchlight eyes

Open Focus - Open Attention

differentiating eyes, neck, and torso

Neck, Eye, and Spine Differentiation

further suggestions:

Knee Comfort
Shoulder and Arm Comfort

where do Awareness Through Movement lessons come from?

Awareness Through Movement lessons are part of the Feldenkrais Method® of Somatic Education. The Feldenkrais Method uses gentle touch, movement, and verbal cues to communicate directly with the sensory-motor areas of your nervous system to help you learn more effective self-organization. A private, hands on, session is called Functional Integration®; lessons given through verbal cues, either privately or in groups, are called Awareness Through Movement lessons.

Either approach offers an easy, non-critical way to help you move beyond habitual patterns of self-organization to new ways of moving, thinking, and feeling. The lessons honor your unique physical shape and abilities; they are done at your own pace and always in a range that is comfortable for you. This is a learning method, rather than a therapeutic intervention - it teaches self-reliance.

about Jeff Bickford

Jeff Bickford has devoted much of his life to the teaching of awareness and movement. He worked as a choreographer, director, dancer, lighting designer and teacher in the performing arts for thirty years. He is a long time student of dharma teacher Ken McLeod, a Guild Certified Feldenkrais® Teacher, holds Master Certification in Neuro Linguistic Programming, has worked extensively with the Nikolai, Laban, and Bartenieff awareness and movement philosophies, and has worked as a Pilates teacher. His classes and private sessions enable people to deepen their awareness and move with greater skill, confidence, and ease.

if you wish to read more please go to jbbickford.com, 'about Jeff Bickford'.