

## Painful Meditation

*By Carolyn Reynolds*

You made it past the hurdles of space and time. You made a space for sitting and carved out the time in your busy life. Pleased, you sit and feel the sense of peace grow as you are aware of the breath moving through your nostrils. The body calms and all systems are in harmony. Even the stream of thoughts wafts off without getting your attention. Then suddenly your attention is seized by the immediacy of pain in the hip, or knee, or lower back. Dang! You realize that some discomfort can be ignored because it's just sensation that will shift and change as you sit. But this isn't that kind of discomfort. What to do?

There are many supports on the market to help a meditator sit more comfortably. Lifting the hips on a little pillow so the lumbar spine can tilt forward in its natural curve is very helpful. There are crescent shaped pillows, straps that go around the lower back and around the knees, little benches that look like the kneelers in a Catholic church, etc. All are helpful for some of the people some of the time.

But all you want is a healthy body that can serve you to sit on a floor anywhere you may be, without being dependent on a support. Barring any structural anomalies or injuries, that is possible. (Not those anomalies can keep you from meditation, because a chair works just fine.) Sarah Powers presents a workshop on something she calls yin yoga. It is probably called yin yoga because it appears to be the opposite of the kind of yoga that uses constant motion, strength, flexibility and a sweatband. Having experienced Sarah's workshop, it is assuredly not yin in the aspect of easy. Sarah uses postures that enhance meditation. The postures are held for 20 minutes with a steady even breath. Slow, easy release into a counter posture follows the holding. This holding opens joints and encourages the healthy curves of the spinal column. Sarah had been an avid student of Iyengar style hatha yoga and Ashtanga style hatha yoga but found she was in pain when sitting at meditation retreats, hence her advocacy of this particular approach to the body.

If you sit long enough often enough, the knees will eventually come to the floor. If it is time to read, move to the floor, tummy down, and place the book in front of you. This is the cobra posture and it will enhance the curve of the spine and particularly the cervical vertebra. (This suggestion was overheard when a chiropractor was giving a teenage girl some preventative prescriptions.) Be careful of the desire to want it all now. It amazes me when a new student will come to class, and not being able to do what more experienced students can do, will get discouraged; and never come back. Be kind and gentle with yourself. Yoga is a path, not a destination.

When you go to your hatha yoga class, ask your teacher for postures that will open your hips, strengthen your lower back, and enhance the natural curve of your spine. Do those postures with a "settle-into-it" frame of mind. Take time with them. Then you are ready to do your body scan, pranayama, and move effortlessly into meditation. Preparation greatly enhances meditation.