

# SIT WITH LESS PAIN

Gentle Yoga for Meditators  
*and Everyone Else*



JEAN ERLBAUM

*Foreword by Frank Jude Boccio, author of Mindfulness Yoga*



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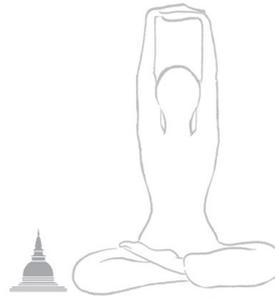
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*and Everyone Else*

Jean Erlbaum

Illustrations by Michelle Antonisse

Foreword by Frank Jude Boccio



WISDOM PUBLICATIONS • BOSTON

“Jean Erlbaum’s book is a true blessing for everyone who has a body. Everyone should own this amazing book.”

—**Melissa Myozen Blacker, coeditor of *The Book of Mu***

“Whether you spend your days in the temple or in the boardroom, *Sit with Less Pain* is the perfect companion guide to remaining comfortable and pain-free. A must-have for everybody who sits!”

—**Willa Miller, coauthor of *The Arts of Contemplative Care***

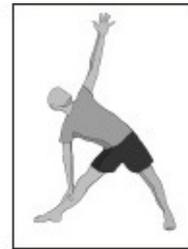
RELIEVE AND RELEASE THE STIFFNESS THAT COMES FROM PROLONGED SITTING—AT A DESK, BEHIND THE WHEEL, OR ON A MEDITATION CUSHION—WITH THESE EASY-TO-FOLLOW EXERCISES.

**A**nyone who sits for long periods knows the discomfort of cramping joints and aching backs; free yourself from pain with this beautifully illustrated guide. The book is organized anatomically, helping you to immediately focus on the part of the body that causes you pain: tense shoulders, stiff knees, sore hips, etc. For readers who have mastered the individual stretches and want a more intensive experience, *Sit with Less Pain* also includes instructions for sequences that combine several exercises into a flowing series of movements.

Gorgeous, clear illustrations and lay-flat binding—which lets the book stay open at the proper page—will help you perfect the poses. Also included are variations on stretches that can be done seated in a chair, for those who are wheelchair-bound or just feel more comfortable sitting.

“Not only do my eyes see the beauty in this much-needed book for meditators and anyone who sits on any chair, my heart is happy that we finally have this well-mapped-out guide. Thank you, Jean!”

—**Lakshmi Voelker, founder of Lakshmi Voelker Chair Yoga**



**Jean Erlbaum, MS, ERYT, LVCYT**, has been studying yoga and meditation since 1965 and has been teaching since 1972. She is certified as a teacher of several styles of yoga, meditation, and stress reduction. She has studied Zen for over thirty years and in 2012 was designated as a senior Dharma teacher by Boundless Way Zen.

To my dear friend, writing mentor, and Dharma sister Genie Zeiger (1943–2009)

Thank you for your ideas for this book, which you generously gave to me over your last few months and for coming back to sit on my left shoulder and whispering suggestions in my ear until it was done

The mind is like the wind and the body like the sand: if you want to know how the wind is blowing, you  
can look at the sand

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—BONNIE BAINBRIDGE COHEN

*Sensing, Feeling, and Action: The Experiential Anatomy of Body-Mind Centering*

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Foreword by Frank Jude Boccio

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I FIND IT HEARTENING that the postures and movements of hatha yoga are finally being accepted and celebrated by many Buddhist practitioners and teachers. It was not always this way; while today there are Insight Meditation centers—and even Zen centers—offering yoga during their retreats, some younger folk might not be aware that such body-centered practice was often frowned upon or even actively discouraged. In the 1970s, when I began Zen practice, my teacher told me to stop practicing yoga, adding, “Zazen is all you need to practice.”

As Jean Erlbaum, who began her practice in 1965, shares, “Yoga was seen as a serious detour from practice.” And like her, I found ways to sneak my practice in during retreats: slipping into the woods around the monastery, or doing a couple of standing postures in the bathroom during breaks. Why? Because it works! It helped me then, and it continues to support me now in my sitting practice.

The irony, of course, is that for millennia yoga was simply the practice of yoking body, breath, and mind (the original meaning of the word *yoga*, coming from the Sanskrit root *yuj*, means “to yoke”) which was just what we were attempting while sitting on our zafus. Hardly any of our teachers and fellow practitioners seemed to remember that the buddha was a yogi!

Nowadays, yoga has become mainstreamed and commodified, with an estimated twenty million Americans or more practicing it. The word *yoga* has become synonymous with the postures (*asana*) and movements of hatha yoga, a relatively recent form of yoga, which as contemporarily practiced goes back only to the turn of the nineteenth century, and it has often been divorced from its mental component. Generally, when someone says they practice yoga, what they mean is that they practice postural yoga: the physical forms. But it’s helpful to keep in mind that all authentic yoga involves the meditative awareness we cultivate in sitting meditation. When this is understood, the postural practice, as Erlbaum teaches it, “is not separate from meditation practice—it becomes the practice.”

I was very happy to see that this is her approach, as it is also mine. In fact, the reason I refer to my practice of hatha yoga as “mindfulness yoga” and not “mindful yoga” is because the emphasis is on the practice of the postures as a vehicle to cultivate greater embodied awareness. The important thing isn’t so much that a posture is done mindfully as that mindfulness is cultivated and brought to the practice of the posture. Similarly, Erlbaum writes, “By fully sinking into the specific sensations of each pose, we create the possibility of relinquishing the usual busyness of mind and expanding beyond the usual constrictions of the body, beyond the boundary of ‘this self.’”

All this is not to deny or underplay the many well-known physical benefits of hatha yoga for meditation practitioners: from stress reduction and the increasing of the efficiency of the immune system to the relief of muscle and joint pain and increasing circulatory and respiratory health. Why among us practitioners of sitting meditation hasn’t experienced sore, stiff, and painful necks, shoulders, or backs? How many of us are free of hip or knee pain or of loss of circulation in our hands or feet? Patanjali, in the *Yoga Sutras*, speaks about preventing the pain that hasn’t yet arisen. The practice of hatha yoga can both relieve us from current pain, and with a consistent, well-balanced practice, it can prevent future pain.

In this comprehensive practice manual, Erlbaum offers practical, easily accessible practices including valuable instruction on proper breathing technique and detailed instruction on a variety of stretches and postures that can be practiced on a yoga mat or in a chair. She helpfully presents the exercises grouped for specific areas of the body from the upper body (including exercises

for eyes, jaw, neck, shoulders, and upper back) through the middle body, and down to legs, knees, ankles, and feet. I am also happy to see her emphasis on the importance of relaxation as a *practice*. Too many students fail to understand that relaxation indeed requires active cultivation and the time to do so.

In the second half of the book, Erlbaum offers suggested pose sequences of varying lengths—without poses for both mat or chair practice. The sequences are for relaxing or energizing, as well as for targeting specific body “hot spots” of tension, discomfort, and pain. And throughout, she speaks with the compassionate and confident voice of the truly experienced teacher/practitioner who understands the life demands of a contemporary householder. I smiled when she shares having “memories of squeezing yoga sessions into my children’s nap times,” as I too am finding myself having to continually adapt my practice to my toddler daughter’s agenda!

Dogen Zenji refers to zazen as the “Dharma gate of great ease and joy.” Too often, for many practitioners, it seems like anything but! This book offers a wonderful resource for yogis who practice sitting meditation and wish to experience greater bodily ease and the joy that arises with it. It is also valuable for yogis with a hatha yoga practice who wish to cultivate sitting meditation; it presents a clear and concise manual on how to create a strong foundation for sitting by using the practices with which they are already familiar. I am appreciative and grateful to Jean Erlbaum for writing this book and to Wisdom Publications for making it available. May it bring great ease and joy to many!

Frank Jude Boccia

**I**N THIS BOOK, I offer not only practical stretches to alleviate tense or achy bodies but also movements that invite the mind to anchor into the body as a form of meditation. Many of the benefits of doing yoga are well known: reducing stress by slowing and deepening the breath; calming the nervous system and relaxing muscles, ligaments, and tendons; increasing the efficiency of all the systems of the body; strengthening the immune system and bringing balance to the whole hormonal system; encouraging the flow of all bodily fluids (blood, lymph, cerebrospinal fluid, etc.). Additionally, deep breathing enhances the work of the digestive, pulmonary, and cardiovascular systems and massages all the internal organs. Many people rely on yoga to prevent or heal back or joint injury, to align and strengthen muscles and bones. Yogis have known for thousands of years that their practices have kept them healthy and strong. As more research is done in the West, the substantiated list of benefits continues to grow.

Yoga has specific benefits for those of us who spend long stretches of time sitting in meditation. There are particular parts of the body that need to be in alignment to stay flexible and strong in order to maintain a comfortable sitting practice. Many folks report achy necks and shoulders, weak middle or lower backs, tight hip joints, or excruciating pain in their knees. I have heard some meditators report loss of circulation in their hands and feet, eyestrain, or headache. We each have our weak areas and places we carry stress. The good news is that simple yoga practices can prevent and remedy many of these problems.

One of the most important benefits of yoga is its invitation into the present reality of one's own body: what hurts, what is pleasant, one's particular rhythms of breath and heart beat. In order to be awake, we must not just think about, not just notice, but fully enter into the sensations of knees throbbing and breath moving. Instead of avoiding the complaints of our body, we can honor each sensation as an aspect of our current reality. This allows us to see more clearly the places we hold tight and therefore gives us a greater possibility of wholly accepting and then releasing those places. The path of liberation leads us to know intimately the layer cake of related attachments of body, mind, emotions, habits, and patterns. The stretching and deep breathing of yoga give us an opportunity to recognize and either dissolve those attachments or find skillful means to meet them.

Yoga can bring us into the authentic embodiment of each moment. When we pay full attention during a forward bend, we can drop all memories of how our back has been, judgment of how it should be, worries about how it may get worse, or fantasies of how to make it better. All there is in the moment is the stretch, the breath, and any physical changes or insights as they occur. Yoga used this way is not separate from meditation practice—it becomes the practice. By fully sinking into the specific sensations of each pose, we create the possibility of relinquishing the usual busyness of mind and expanding beyond the usual constrictions of the body, beyond the boundary of “this self.”

We can create regular yoga sessions for ourselves and take the visceral awareness this practice promotes into both our formal meditations and into our everyday lives. We can cultivate a larger yoga an ability to align with our body while sitting, walking, washing the dishes, or climbing into bed at night. We can cultivate mindfulness of what changes with each movement and of the stillness that remains even as we move through our days.

I have been teaching yoga at meditation retreats for over thirty years. The feedback I hear most often

is that a body free from tension and pain allows for easier sitting and a quieter mind. Yoga can help us go beyond watching the movements of body and mind; it allows us to become “bodymind,” to embody this one thing we always are. My hope is that these stretches help you as much as they have helped me, so that we all can sit deeply and live with grace and flexibility in all circumstances.

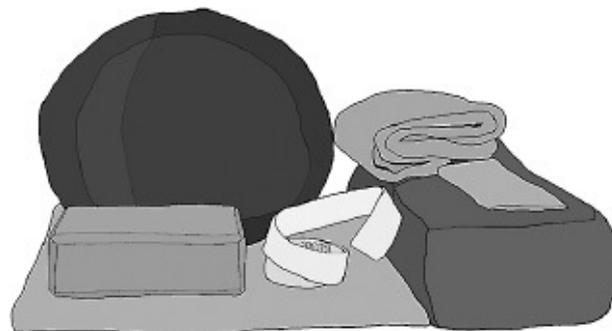
AS YOU PERFORM the exercises in this book, listen well to your body and honor its limitations. For example, if you have untreated high blood pressure or glaucoma, you may want to skip or modify poses that ask you to drop your head forward; if you have recently had hip, knee, or shoulder surgery, you want to avoid poses that could stress the affected joints; if you are pregnant, there are some poses that are particularly helpful and others you may want to avoid. The model for some of the poses in this book, for instance, is a gorgeous woman named Sojee who modeled some poses in her fourth month of pregnancy and others in her eighth month. She modified the poses as appropriate and used propping as she needed. After the first trimester, depending on the placement of the fetus, many women feel it is best to skip poses that require lying flat on their back for more than a few minutes. Especially after the first trimester, extreme backward or forward bends or spinal twists are not recommended in order to protect the abdominal muscles.

If you have any questions about the wisdom of doing any of the stretches, please contact your healthcare provider or a certified yoga instructor. On some days you may be able to stretch more easily than other days. Please feel free to modify or skip stretches that don't feel right. Experiment with different ways of moving that serve your body. Instead of putting yoga on a list of have-to's and trying to fit in a set amount of poses, allow yourself to thoroughly enjoy each stretch that suits you in each session.



## PROPS

Each of us has a unique anatomy, and so it's important to honor our special needs as we engage in sitting or stretching. We may at times have to deal with various physical and emotional discomforts, but there is no reason to endure avoidable pain. For this reason, I make suggestions throughout this book of possible modifications and propping that can support you in a stretch; we can enhance our sitting practice by using props to help us sit comfortably erect. Many yoga poses are possible to do either on a mat or in a chair. If you prefer the chair versions of the poses, please make sure you have a comfortable, sturdy chair. For some poses, a chair with arms works best; in other poses, an armless chair will work better. A wheelchair that is secured and balanced is a wonderful place to practice stretches, using leg and foot rests as needed for poses.

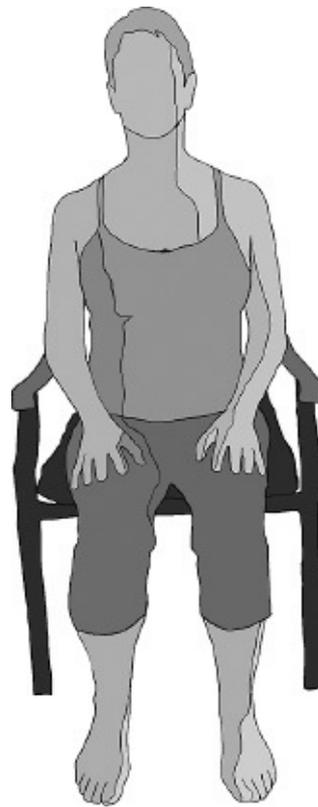


You may want to have the following props handy in case you need them: a yoga belt (or any long strap you have at home), a yoga block, a yoga bolster, a *zafu* (meditation cushion) or folded bed pillow.

a small towel, and a flat blanket. During relaxation, you may like using an eye pillow, which is just the right size to cover the eyes and block light. These pillows are usually made from silk, often filled with flax seeds, and sometimes scented with lavender, which is known to calm the nervous system. Feel free to experiment. I have heard reports of great gratitude toward everyday items (e.g., furniture pieces, countertops, couch cushions) as wonderful aids in stretching. Please make sure that the props you use add to your stability and do not detract from it.

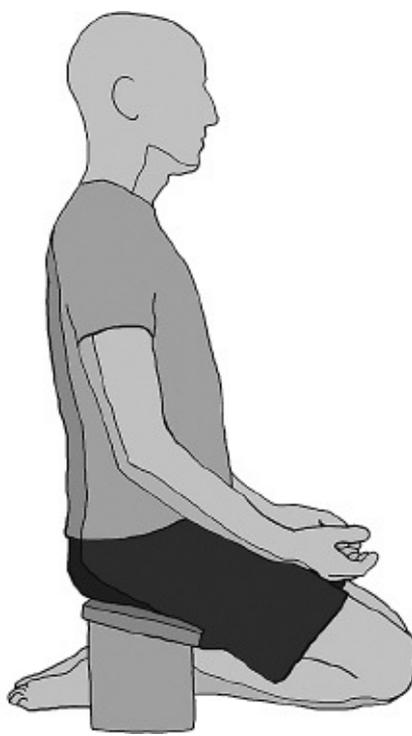


## CHAIR OR CUSHION: HOW TO SIT



Whether you choose to sit on a chair or a cushion, sit with an erect spine that maintains its natural curves. Your hips should be directly under your shoulders, which should be directly under your ears. Take time to lengthen the back of your neck and drop your shoulders away from your ears. This opens your chest and invites ease of breathing. This kind of alignment provides for a bodymind conducive sitting. For the purposes of this book, sitting erect in a chair is called Seated Mountain Pose.

If you are sitting on a chair or on the floor, it is helpful to have a cushion under your buttocks in order to tilt your pelvis slightly forward. You may want to use a traditional meditation cushion if you are sitting on the floor and a thinner cushion or wedge if you are on a chair. You can also use a traditional *seiza* bench, which is usually a simple wooden bench, specifically designed for meditation with this same helpful tilt for the pelvis.



We get no extra meditation points for some kind of “advanced” method of sitting. Experiment and see what allows you to maintain the natural curve of your lower back and to elongate your spine. When sitting in any traditional pose, try out different props or combination of props to aid affected body parts. For example, in half lotus, placing a small cushion under the knee that is higher will help ground it and prevent strain to the corresponding hip. It is a good idea, if possible, to alternate the leg that rests on top.



If you are in a seiza position (knees bent with legs folded under the buttocks, with or without a bench), raising the height of the bench or cushion you are using can bring relief to lower back, hips, knees, and feet. Feel free to use a pad or folded towel under your feet and knees as needed.



Try massaging ankles, knees, and hip joints at the beginning of a sitting. Try rocking from side to side once you are seated. Being kind to your body on the way into a seated position may make it easier to sit comfortably for a longer stretch of time.



## **MAT YOGA**

Pick a quiet spot with room to move and adequate padding (a firm folded blanket, a yoga mat, or both). Please make sure that the surface on which you are stretching is level. Some of the poses in this book are done lying on a mat and some are done standing. Many are done in a seated position and are possible to do right on your meditation cushion.



## **CHAIR YOGA**

For those of us with injuries or weaknesses in our backs or knees, it is especially appropriate to sit in a chair when meditating or stretching. Many of us are Westerners unused to floor sitting and may feel more comfortable in a chair.

Many of the poses that are traditionally done on the floor can easily be done in a chair. When there are modifications or instructions for transforming a pose into a chair version, I give special directions for that; otherwise, please assume you can use the instructions on a mat or in a chair. Some of the floor poses do not translate well to chair yoga; for those poses I offer alternative stretches that will give similar benefits. For stability in stretching, you may want to have your chair on a yoga mat or placed next to a wall. For some poses, a chair with arms can give extra support; with some poses, a chair with no arms leaves more space for stretching. Please choose the chair that works best for you in each pose.

If you sit in a chair, make sure your feet and seat bones feel rooted and stable. If you feel temptation to slump back in your chair, please remember that this disturbs the natural alignment of the spine and, if done as a regular practice, will weaken your back muscles. Please use a chair that

stable, firm, and comfortable. A straight-back kitchen or desk chair will work better than an upholstered chair in helping you keep an erect spine. If you feel your back rounding or weakening, try placing a cushion or a rolled towel between the small of your back and the chair. If your feet don't reach the floor, please place a cushion under them for support.



## RECORDING

If you find that you have to interrupt the flow of poses in order to keep referring to the book, you may want to record yourself reading the instructions for a series of poses. This may help the yoga become more of a meditation (instead of a how-to exercise). It may be particularly useful to listen to the recording of the Body Scan and Savasana series while relaxing into the depth of those practices. For information on *Sit with Less Pain* companion CDs for mat and chair yoga, please see the resource section at the back of this book.



## STRETCHING

The exercises in this book are designed to release the joints that sometimes make seated meditation difficult and the muscles that tend to get tight in long-term sitting. The poses can be of benefit to your overall health, stamina, and clarity. The poses in this book are quite gentle and should be fine for most people, but please keep in mind your own safety and pleasure as you stretch.

Stretching is usually more comfortable when done at least two to three hours after a big meal. An expensive yoga outfit is not essential for your yoga practice, but loose-fitting, comfortable clothing really do make a difference—for example, sweat pants or loose-fitting shorts are great, but tight belts or restrictive jewelry are not so great. For standing poses, bare feet work best as socks or tights can be slippery.

Toward the end of the book, I give instructions for two relaxation practices: one to come before and one to come after your stretching. Please make sure to include these periods of relaxation in your routine; doing so can dramatically deepen the effects of the yoga.

Many people feel that bouncing while stretching will somehow let them get deeper into a stretch. Actually bouncing shortens the muscles and is counterproductive. Once you have found your way into a pose, my suggestion is that you actively rest in it. By “actively” I mean maintaining the edge of your stretch—as far as you can go, which may change as you remain in that stretch—and maintaining your awareness of the moment-to-moment spontaneous shifts of bodymind as you stay in that stretch. By “resting” I mean sinking into the fullness of the stretch without forcing or bouncing. Focusing on the natural flow of the breath and the subtle sensations throughout the body help enhance this active resting.

In most cases, I give directions for just one side of the body and suggest you repeat the pose on the other side. My hope is that the anatomic detail of my words will help massage your body into your best stretch and alignment. Even though I put the poses into separate sections according to body part, most poses will benefit several parts of the body at the same time. (After all, “the hip bone’s connected to the thigh bone...”) In fact, when any part of the body is released, the whole body gives a sigh of relief.

Many forms of yoga emphasize a particular alignment for each pose. This is helpful to keep the poses safe, to maximize the stretch, and to build strength. For this book I give only minimal instructions in alignment, asking the reader to focus on comfort, awareness, and release. While there are obvious benefits to focusing on alignment, trying to remember where to place or lift each part of the body can be counterproductive to inducing the embodied, meditative experience that is the goal of this book.

Please allow these stretches to become an integral part of your practice. At the end of the book I suggest combining several poses into flowing sequences. You may choose to do these sequences on a daily basis to keep your body supple and to prevent injury. And be sure to make note of the stretches that serve you best; you may choose to focus just on the poses that appeal to you as you prepare for release from sitting.

**I**N MEDITATION, we may count the breath or just watch it move in and out. Often the instruction for meditation is to make no effort to change the breath, just to witness the natural flow of inhalation and exhalation. When we move into yoga, we have a different relationship to the breath because we are using it intentionally in our effort to position the body and then in our exploration of that posture. Usually on an inhalation, the body naturally will expand, lift, and extend. On an exhalation, we can move more easily twist, release, and rest.

Breath is said to be the bridge between the mind and the body. It can serve us to slow and deepen the breath and imagine that we are breathing into particular parts of the body as we stretch. Even though we cannot literally breathe into each part of the body, imagining doing so can immerse us more fully in the execution and specific effects of a pose. It can help us to become aware of all the sensations we may find, whether they are pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. In this way we use the breath and our awareness of sensation to enhance the stretching, to keep it safe, and to settle even more deeply into the body.

When we breathe into a stretch, we can visualize fresh blood, oxygen, and energy coming into that part of the body we are stretching. When we exhale, we can imagine that we sweep clear that part of the body, releasing whatever we no longer need on the out breath. It is my belief that this visualization of breath moving into and out of the body has very real physical, emotional, and energetic effects; that there is an alchemy created by our physical efforts and our focused concentration. The magic that happens when body, breath, and mind become just-this-one-thing has been known by centuries of yogis and decades of Western medical researchers. We see more and more evidence that full, deep, conscious breathing can maintain elasticity and increased capacity of the lungs, efficiency of the cardiovascular system, and provide a great massage for the other organs as the lungs expand and contract. For meditators, the breath can be used in conjunction with stretching or as preparation for practice right on the cushion. It can become an integral part of one's practice.

■ **NOSE BREATHING:** Inhaling through the nose (instead of the mouth) can warm and filter the air that comes in, making for easier reception in the lungs. Nose breathing naturally slows the breath and affects the systems of the body, including the nervous system. ■



■ **SEATED BELLY BREATHING:** The lower belly, or hara, is considered to be the center of gravity, as well as a locus of power in martial arts. Breathing into the belly at the beginning of a sit can bring focus and strength into our practice.

Take time to notice your natural breath. Is it slow, fast, deep, shallow, from the chest or belly, through the nose or mouth? Then, as you feel ready, begin to breathe through the nose, slowing the breath. Placing your hands on your lower belly (as low as you can, just above the pubic bone), watch the belly expand like a balloon on the inhalation and flatten on the exhalation. The instruction “breathe into your belly” is actually an invitation to breathe to the lowest part of your lungs. When we do expand our lower lungs in that way, we press the diaphragm muscle down into the abdominal cavity. This gives the sensation of blowing up a balloon in the belly and creates not only deeper breath but also a wonderful massage for the digestive organs. Have a few rounds of this belly, or hara, breathing until it feels natural and easy for you.

Many people combine this slow deep belly breath with their meditation practice—whether visualization or koan work or just simply watching the breath move in and out, in and out, belly expanding and contracting, expanding and contracting. This deep belly breath can become a swinging door of inside/outside, self/other, enlightenment/delusion. ■

■ **LYING DOWN BELLY BREATHING:** If it is not easy for you to breathe deeply in a seated position, you may want at first to practice lying down. This can easily be incorporated at the beginning or end of a stretching session or just before going to sleep. Make sure you are comfortable and well supported and on a flat surface. If your lower back is not comfortable lying flat, you can bend your knees, placing your feet six to eight inches apart on the floor or bed.

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