



# SQUAT REVOLUTION:

reclaim your squatters' rights by denise kaufman

**WARNING: sitting may be hazardous to your health**

IN 1852, AN ENGLISH COLONIALIST WORKING IN INDIA voiced his complaints about the local workmen. He was particularly irritated and offended that blacksmiths, carpenters, and masons squatted to work, complaining indignantly, "All work with their knees nearly on a level with their chin: the left hand – when not used as the kangaroo uses his tail to form a tripod – grasps the left knee and binds the trunk to the doubled limbs." This man was not the first or last to liken people who sit on floors to animals. He was more explicit than many about why he found the posture inferior: it suggested "indolence and inefficiency...especially irritating to an Englishman," but even more so to one who hires and pays such workmen.

*The colonialist tried to force these men to work his way, but they*

*ignored him; so he ordered the anvils on which they worked to be bolted to surfaces at table height. The next day, he was pleased to see them working off the floor. But not for long. He returned the following day to find the men squatting on top of stools in order to reach the anvils. He gave up, reasoning that he could not get workmen to stand while working because of "a deficiency of muscular power in the lower limbs," which he attributed to their not using chairs. Our amateur sociologist speculated that chairs or raised seats were "one of those natural steps to a higher civilization." He was wrong about that, but right in observing that we are apt to overlook the function of such artifacts until we imagine or experience life without them. Chairs have become second nature to us, virtually indivisible from us – and therefore invisible to us. — Galen Cranz*

If you look at all the shapes of your daily life as a flow of *asana* or postures, which ones do you spend the most time in? Even if you strengthen, stretch and sweat in a daily *vinayasa* practice, if you are like most of my friends, many of your waking hours are spent sitting with your booty on some piece of furniture; a chair, sofa or car seat. I just called five of my friends and they reluctantly admitted to extended chair time; Karen, who works in organizational development, estimates she sits 5 hours a day; Joan, a businesswoman, says 6 hours a day; Tam, a writer, says 8, Nigel, a record exec, says 5 plus, and Maria, an editor, says 10 hours a day. Take a moment to compute: how many hours a day do you spend in chair *asana*?

Consider this: even if downward facing dog is your favorite *asana* of all time, would you spend 5 hours a day in it?

The first problem with sitting is that we spend too much time in this one pose. The human body is designed for flow and movement! Furthermore, chair sitting is the worst shape we could choose to spend long hours in – it's much harder on our bodies than standing. Remember, we are talking about a shape you might hold for 35 to 70 hours a week, year after year. The damage done by chair sitting is insidious because it happens so slowly that we don't even notice it.

Dr. Galen Cranz, in her book *The Chair – Rethinking Body, Culture and Design*, reports on research indicating that spending long hours in chair *asana* diminishes your core range of motion and contributes to a list of health problems you'd rather not have on your resume: back pain, disc degeneration, fatigue, stress, varicose veins, and problems with elimination, circulation and digestion. Worse yet, when sitting in a chair, pressure on the spinal discs is 30 percent greater than when standing. Sitting in chairs strains the spinal column, back muscles, lower back nerves and the diaphragm.

Our sedentary, office-bound lifestyles are a recent cultural pattern. Not so long ago, even if people had chairs in their homes, the demands

of their lives guaranteed that they rarely sat for very long. We are primates. Squatters and tree climbers. Animals. Watch what your cats and dogs do all day long. What is natural for us is to move – to change positions often – to flex, bend, twist, lean, wiggle, and stretch through our days. Instead, we have become devotees of chair *asana*.

Sadly, our devotion is misplaced. The design of a chair has nothing to do with what is good for us. Chairs are like a 21st century equivalent of foot binding or corsets – a strange cultural habit we inherited without understanding the consequences. Someday we'll look back on chairs the way we do now on cigarettes and wonder how something so bad for us was accepted and used everywhere without being questioned.

According to Dr. Cranz "...holding any posture for long periods of time is the ultimate problem; but holding the classic right-angle seated posture in particular has its special stresses, which no amount of ergonomic tinkering can eliminate."

## connect with your connective tissue

The connective tissue of our core joints is in a relentless state of contracture. You might say we are shrink-wrapped and the wrapping's getting tighter. This process accelerates as we age.

When your body conforms to the angular shape of a chair, your spine is at a 90 degree angle to your femurs (thighs) and your femurs are at a 90 degree angle to your lower legs. When you hold this half-flexed, compressive shape for hours at a time over years, your connective tissue shrinks to conform to this underuse of your range of motion and the mobility of core joints becomes more and more compromised. Hamstrings get shorter and tighter and you lose the flexibility of the hips and lumbar spine.

If you've lost mobility you can start to regain it by getting off of chairs and hanging out in shapes that demand deeper openness. A great way to do that is to spend more time on the earth. The way our bodies need

to shift and move when our hips and feet are on the same plane cultivates core mobility. Squatting does that. So do other shapes we move into when hanging out at kissing level with toddlers. Floor time is core time.

### reclaim your squatters' rights

Squatting is often associated with the poor and humble people of the world. It's the shape that people naturally fold into to work, poop, give birth and hang out in cultures where even the elders remain fluid and flexible throughout their lives.

Think of Asia, Africa and beyond – people are working the rice fields of India, playing music in Ghana, waiting for a bus in Nicaragua, and they are all squatting. Businessmen in China, wearing their suits, squat when waiting for the train. These people have an innate body wisdom that chair sitters have lost. In a mistaken notion of becoming civilized, we've given up full flexion (femurs to ribcage, i.e. squatting,) our essential beneficial *asana*.

As yogins and yoginis our practice includes the *seva* (service) of helping to reduce unnecessary suffering in the world. According to the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, in 2005 Americans spent 85.9 BILLION dollars looking for relief from back and neck pain through surgery, doctor's visits, X-rays, MRI scans and medications, up from \$52.1 billion in 1997. That is a LOT of suffering. Over the years, I've met quite a few people who have reduced or eliminated back pain simply by learning to hang out in a squat.

We in the yoga community are the perfect folks to start the ripple effect of the Squat Revolution. We are usually wearing comfortable clothing that allows us to drop into a squat anywhere. We're used to smooshing into unusual shapes around other people. Our practice includes cultivating a spirit of good cheer, a sense of humor and a smile. If we start squatting in public places, we'll give others enormous permission to start squatting, too. Hint: When I'm squatting out in the world if people look at me a little suspiciously I just say that I'm doing my back exercises. It's a good opener and people often start asking questions.

The revolution starts at the base of your spine. Let's change these *samskaras*, these habitual patterns of sitting that cause so much damage. What if we honor the dynamic flow of our bodies rather than imprisoning it on the antiquated descendents of thrones? What if government offices, concert halls, churches, schools and movie theaters had carpets instead of chairs? A transition from chairs back to the earth would reverberate through every facet of our lives from architecture, fashion and design to all aspects of social norms. I love imagining it. And we'll know the revolution is gaining momentum when Oprah tosses out the chairs and interviews her guests sitting on a beautiful carpet with a few silk throw pillows.

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Pictured: Denise Kaufman  
Photo: Adam Latham, angeladam.com



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## squatting opportunities in daily life

- Sorting the recycling
- Chatting on the phone
- Inspecting your dog for fleas
- Waiting at the crosswalk for the signal to turn green
- Watching TV
- Checking the surf
- Waiting at the gate for your flight
- Reading your newspaper
- Changing baby's diaper
- Shopping the lower shelves at the grocery store
- Playing your harmonica
- Weeding your garden
- Giving a shoulder massage



*Squatting Keeps You Loose: Squatting is good for awhile then I switch back to either a cross-legged position, or a "Z" position, or virasana [hero's pose], or a wide-legged upavista konasana [wide angle seated forward fold]. I like having 3 - 4 different sitting positions both for when I write and when I meditate. —Erich Schiffmann, [movingintostillness.com](http://movingintostillness.com)*

## get down

Let's make "lower" living spaces more cozy and inviting. Leave shoes at the front door, use comfy carpets with padding, add various sizes of floor pillows, lower tables and return to the ground. Western chair culture has been looking down on floor culture for too long. Part of our disconnection with the natural world has to do with the way we live a few feet above it. When do our bodies even touch the earth?

## your squat

Remember that each of us squats in our own unique way. The shape of your natural squat is ultimately determined by the shapes of the bones of your hips and thighs (the ilium and femur). The angle and shape of your acetabulum (socket) and the angles and orientation of the head and neck of your femur all play a part. Some of us flow into a squat with feet parallel and knees closer together. Others squat with legs apart and feet turned out. Find the shape that flows from your own center. Explore.

## benefits of squatting

- Maintains hip flexion
- Stretches hamstrings at the insertions
- Decompresses and opens the lumbar spine
- Maintains range of motion of the knees, ankles and feet
- Improves circulation
- Supports digestion and elimination
- Cultivates being grounded
- Enhances connection with the earth
- Enlivens flow of *prana* (life-force)

## squat evolution

### Horizontal Variations:

**Upward facing frog** (squat shape on your back): Lying on your back, draw your knees to your chest. Just hang out here. Relax. Breathe. Rock gently if you like. Enjoy the lumbar release.

**Frog** (squat shape face down): Kneel and let your knees open to a comfortable width, hinge forward from your hips and keep your buttocks back toward your heels. Put some padding under your knees and feet if needed. Melt into the earth.

### Vertical variations:

**Supported Squat:** Use whatever props you need to work your way into the vertical shape. Try a supported squat with your back against a wall and a rolled up towel under your heels if needed. You might want a block or bolster under your buttocks at first and then, over time, as your flexibility increases, you may lose the prop.

**Full squat:** Now you're ready to plant rice or give birth!

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