

# Postures for Meditation

*Written by Ines Freedman*

There are many positions we can meditate in: sitting, standing, walking and lying down. These instructions focus on the **sitting** position, the most common position for formal practice, as it's conducive to staying alert and relaxed. For those unable to sit, you may use the alternate option of **lying down**.

The aim of the sitting posture is to balance being upright and alert, with being relaxed. When exploring a sitting posture, we want to choose a method that is relatively easy. Choosing a method that looks good, but is a significant struggle defeats the purpose of meditation. What is most important is what you do with your mind, not what you do with your feet or legs.

## *Sitting Positions*

Sitting on the floor is recommended because it is very stable. A very effective posture has been the pyramid structure of the seated Buddha. We can use a **zafu** (a small pillow) to raise the buttocks just a little, so that the knees can touch the ground. With your bottom on the pillow and two knees touching the ground, you form a stable tripod base. If you are on a hard floor, placing your cushion on a **zabuton** (a square padded mat) or blankets is recommended. (See **Hand Positions** below.)

### **Burmese style:**

- The legs are crossed and the tops/sides of both feet rest on the floor.
- The knees should ideally also rest on the floor. Depending on your flexibility, it may take a bit of practice for the muscles to stretch and the knees to begin to drop. A cushion under the knee(s) can help.
- Sit on the front third of the zafu (if round), which helps keep your back upright.
- Imagine the top of your head being pulled upward towards the ceiling, which straightens your spine, then just let the muscles go soft and relax.
- There should be a slight curve in the lower region of the back. In this position, it takes very little effort to keep the body upright.
- If you sit more than 30 minutes a day, I recommend that you alternate which leg goes in front.



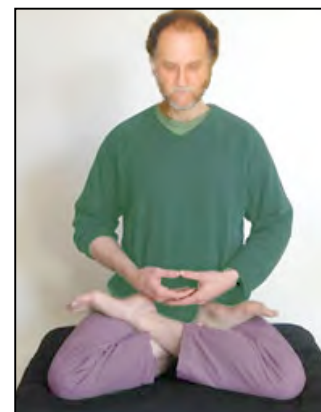
## Half Lotus

The left foot is placed up onto the right thigh and the right leg is tucked under. This position is slightly asymmetrical and sometimes the upper body needs to compensate in order to keep itself absolutely straight. If you sit more than 30 minutes a day, I recommend that you alternate which leg goes on top.



## Full Lotus

The most stable of all the positions is the full lotus, where each foot is placed on the opposite thigh. This is symmetrical and very solid, but only if you can relax in it. Unless it's easy for you, one can easily injure their knees trying to force it.



## Seiza Position *(with a bench, zafu, or just kneeling)*

- You can sit kneeling using a **seiza bench**, which keeps the weight off your feet and helps keep your spine straight.
- You can also sit kneeling with a pillow between your legs. If using a zafu, it is often placed “on edge.”
- Some people prefer kneeling, without any pillow or bench, sitting on their heels.



## Chair

It's easier to stay upright and alert on a chair if you sit closer to the front edge and hold your own spine up instead of leaning against the chair back. If you sit with your pelvis against the back of the chair, you can use a cushion behind you to help keep your back straight. The hips should be slightly higher than the knees, this keeps you from slouching.

- Keep your feet flat on the floor.
- If you are much taller or shorter than “average” you can compensate using a cushion under the feet if shorter, or under the buttocks if taller.
- The hands can be kept on the thighs, or folded on the lap, or on top of a cushion on the lap.



## Lying down *(if sitting is not an option)*

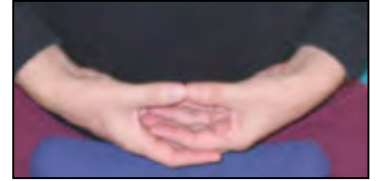
- The tendency to fall asleep is more of an issue, but there are ways of encouraging alertness when lying down.
- Place your feet comfortably apart on the floor with the knees up, the knees not touching. If you fall asleep, the knees will bump each other or fall away and wake you up.
- Another choice is keeping one of your forearms perpendicular to the floor, with your elbow and upper arm resting on the floor. If you get sleepy, it will drop.
- Another option is holding the hands in a “**mudra**” with the thumbs touching each other. This can work as a feedback device: when you are beginning to lose consciousness and drift off, the thumbs will pull apart and that will wake you up to bring you back to your meditation.



## Hand Positions

We recommend any position where the arms and hands can be relaxed, often palms up or down on your thighs or folded on your lap. If there is neck, mid-back or shoulder strain, a small cushion can be placed under the folded hands.

Another common position (a similar one used in zen) involves having the dominant hand held palm up holding the other hand, also palm up, so that the knuckles of both hands overlap. (If you're right-handed, your right hand is holding the left hand...) The thumbs are lightly touching forming an oval, which can rest on the upturned soles of your feet if you're sitting full lotus.



### *General Guidance*

- Wear loose clothing. Loosen your belt if necessary. Material should not gather behind the knees when you cross the legs, inhibiting circulation.
- The mouth is kept closed. Unless you have some kind of a nasal blockage, breathe through your nose. The tongue can be pressed lightly against the upper palate. This may reduce the need to salivate and swallow.
- In our tradition we recommend to keep our eyes closed, but it's perfectly okay to meditate with your eyes open. Usually you do so with the eyes kept lowered, with your gaze resting on the ground about two or three feet in front of you.
- The chin is slightly tucked in.

### *Legs Falling Asleep?*

It's common and normal for the legs to fall asleep, as long as it doesn't take more than a minute or two for the circulation to come back. As we get used to sitting, our circulation can improve so it takes longer for them to fall asleep. For some people different cushions, such as crescent shaped, can take the pressure off, and let us sit comfortably longer.

It's helpful to not give in to every urge to move, but to sit with the discomfort for a while, and then slowly and mindfully make a minor adjustment to make the body more comfortable. If sitting cross-legged, you might switch which legs is in front, or on top.

### *Sitting Equipment*

**Zafu:** a round cushion used for sitting in meditation. Usually made from kapok (a kind of cotton) or buckwheat. (The kapok is firmer while the buckwheat has more 'give'.) A zafu raises the hips, making the cross-legged sitting positions more stable. It can also be used "on end" to place between the legs and kneel.

**Varieties:** there are several varieties available that may be more comfortable for different bodies, including taller ones and different kinds of "crescent" shapes.

**Zabuton:** a square or rectangular padded mat that can sit under the zafu or bench to cushion the knees and ankles. Particularly helpful on hard floors.

**Seiza Bench:** a wooden bench used in the kneeling posture, raising the buttocks up so as not to compress the legs.

