

Meditation Posture Workshop

by Bodhipaksa

It's not only important to be able to sit comfortably for meditation; the way we hold the body has a profound effect on the emotions and mental states that we experience. Something as subtle as the angle that you hold your chin at affects how much thinking you do.

In this article I explain how to use your body effectively in meditation. I'd like to acknowledge the kindness of Windhorse Publications, who allowed us to use illustrations from "Meditation: The Buddhist Way of Tranquillity and Insight", by Kamalashila in this section of the site.

The Importance of Meditation Posture



The first thing to learn in meditation is how to sit effectively.

There are two important principles that you need to bear in mind in setting up a suitable posture for meditation.

- your posture has to allow you to relax and to be comfortable.
- your posture has to allow you to remain alert and aware.

Both of these are vitally important. If you're uncomfortable you'll not be able to meditate because of discomfort. If you can't relax then you won't be able to enjoy the meditation practice and, just as importantly, you won't be able to let go of the underlying emotional conflicts that cause your physical tension.

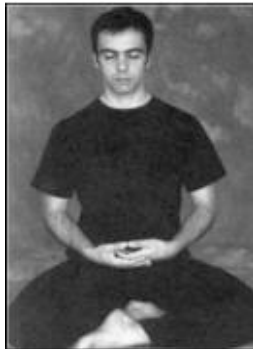
From reading that, you might well think that it would be best to meditate lying down. Bad idea! If you're lying down your mind will be foggy at best, and you may well even fall asleep. If you've ever been to a yoga class that ends with shavasana (the corpse pose), where people lie on the floor and relax, you'll have noticed that about a third of the class is snoring within five minutes.

Forget about meditating lying down. The best way to effectively combine relaxation AND awareness is a sitting posture. You don't have to sit cross-legged, or even sit on the floor. We'll show you how to set up an effective posture in three positions: sitting in a chair, sitting astride a cushion or on a stool, and sitting cross-legged. All of these work: the important thing is to find one in which you will be comfortable.

Remember: you may think it looks really cool to sit cross-legged, but if you don't have the flexibility it takes to do that then you'll simply suffer! Make it easy on yourself. Choose a

posture that is right for you.

Meditation Posture: Elements of Good Posture



There are many different ways to sit for meditation, including using chairs, sitting astride cushions, using a bench, and various ways of sitting cross-legged from the simple tailor position to the full lotus. I'm going to stress again that you need to find a position that is comfortable for you. Listen to your body. Discomfort will distract you from your meditation and is also your body's way of telling you that something is wrong (although you need to learn to distinguish – perhaps you can already – the discomfort of stretching from the discomfort of damaging pain; but we'll come to that later).

We'll look at common postural faults later, but for now, these are the things you have to bear in mind when setting up a posture that will allow you to be comfortable and to be aware:

1. Your spine should be upright, following its natural tendency to be slightly hollowed. You should neither be slumped nor have an exaggerated hollow in your lower spine.
2. Your spine should be relaxed.
3. Your shoulders should be relaxed, and slightly rolled back and down.
4. Your hands should be supported, either resting on a cushion or on your lap, so that your arms are relaxed.
5. Your head should be balanced evenly, with your chin slightly tucked in. The back of your neck should be relaxed, long, and open.
6. Your face should be relaxed, with your brow smooth, your eyes relaxed, your jaw relaxed, and your tongue relaxed and just touching the back of your teeth.

Next we'll look at the most common ways you can sit, beginning with the easiest, and then we'll look at some common faults in posture and how to correct them.

Meditation Posture: Sitting in a Chair



We're going to start with the easier postures first. One thing I often see in beginning meditators is a desire to contort themselves into a posture that is too hard on them. This results in discomfort, distracted meditations, and even physical damage. Be kind to yourself.

You can meditate perfectly well in an ordinary dining-room or office chair. The only thing you have to do to modify the chair is to raise its back legs by maybe an inch or so (2.0 to 2.5cm). This allows you to sit upright without having to either hold your back rigidly, or leaning against the back of the chair. Blocks of wood, or even telephone directories, can be used for this. The meditator in this photograph probably needs to raise the back legs of his chair another half-inch or so, so that he can sit more upright.

When I use a chair to meditate I like to have only the very base of my spine touching the back of the chair. It's best not to lean back in the chair – I think it encourages underachievement! Rest your hands on your thighs, palms down. Have your feet flat on the floor if you can. If your legs are very long or very short compared to the chair, then this might not be possible. If your feet don't reach the floor, then you can use another phone book to rest your feet on. If your legs are too long, then ideally you should find another chair.

Some office chairs are perfect for meditating! Set the seat so that it is slightly tilted forward, and make sure that the backrest is only making very slight contact with your lower back. Adjust the height so that your feet are flat on the floor.

There are also specialist meditation chairs available to help you sit comfortably in an appropriate posture.

Meditation Posture: Kneeling, Using a Cushion or on a Stool



Although you can use a chair to meditate on, for some people it's not as satisfying as sitting on the floor. Somehow, being on the floor gives a more "grounded" feeling.

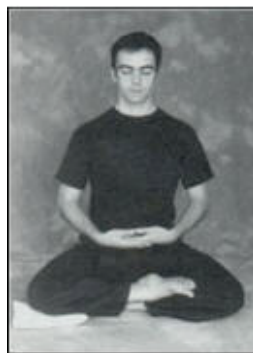
Finding good cushions is important. They need to be really firm, and most pillows just compress too much and can't give you enough support. The same goes for most ordinary, household cushions. However, I have a lovely buckwheat pillow that is perfect when I turn it on end.

This meditator is using cushions (called zafus), that are specially designed for meditation. He's kneeling with them between his legs. Most people who sit astride cushions need two or three, depending on the height required.

The important thing is to get the right height. If you sit too low, you'll end up slumping. Slumping interferes with your ability to stay aware, and can lead to discomfort. If you sit too high, then you will have too much of a hollow in your back, which can lead to pinching. When your back is relatively upright, without you having to use any effort to keep it that way, then you've got the height about right.

Although the meditator above has his hands resting on his thighs, I recommend having your hands supported in front of you (see **hands** section below). You can either have another cushion in front of you to rest your hands on, or you can tie something round your waist and rest your hands on that. I've used a sweater with the arms tied behind my back. If you arrange the sweater carefully, you can make a little "nest" for your hands to rest on. A blanket can also be used to provide support for your hands. Tie the blanket fairly tightly round your waist so that it covers your legs. Then arrange the blanket so that it provides a little "ledge" that you can rest your hands on.

Meditation Posture: Sitting Cross-Legged



Not everyone can sit cross-legged – I'm one of them! There's no need to be in a cross-legged posture to meditate. In fact if you force yourself into an uncomfortable cross-legged posture then you may do long-term damage to your joints, and you certainly won't be comfortable enough to meditate effectively.

However, if you have the flexibility then sitting cross-legged is a very stable and grounded posture. There are a number of ways of sitting with crossed legs.

Meditation Posture: Tailor Position

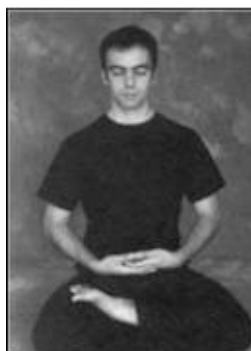
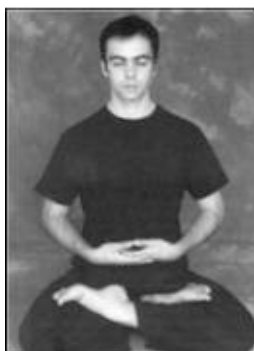
The picture above shows the tailor position, which is the simplest cross-legged position. It's also probably the most common cross-legged posture.

It's very important for you to have both knees on the ground, to give you adequate support. Having three points of contact (your butt, and both knees) gives you a lot of stability. When was the last time you saw a photographer trying to keep a camera stable on a tripod?

If you can't quite get both knees on the floor, then you can use some padding (a thin cushion or folded scarf) under your knee to keep you stable. If one, or both of your knees is more than an inch (2-3cm) off the ground, then use a chair or try sitting astride cushions or a meditation bench or stool. You can always do some yoga to loosen up your hips, and then come back and try a cross-legged posture later.

Again, if your hands don't rest naturally on your lap, keep them supported, perhaps on a cushion or on a blanket. You might want to alternate which foot is in front from time to time. This is a good thing to do because any cross-legged posture is slightly asymmetrical. If you alternate the position of your feet, then you'll even out the imbalances and not "build them in" to your posture.

Meditation Posture: Lotus and Half-lotus



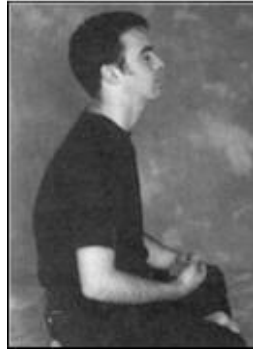
These postures are only suitable for those who are very flexible. I have a friend who had to have the cartilage removed from his knees after years of forcing himself into lotus. If you feel any pain in your knees, or this posture becomes very uncomfortable, then try one of the earlier postures that we looked at.

In the full lotus, the feet rest on the opposite thighs, with the soles pointing upwards (if you have pain in your ankles then stop! and find an easier posture). In the half-lotus, one foot is on the opposite thigh with the sole pointing upwards, while the other rests on the floor, as in the tailor position.

Full lotus is said to be the best position for meditating. The meditator who is able to sit comfortably in full lotus is close to the ground (which, for some reason, seems to be helpful in feeling "grounded"), and is also in a very balanced and symmetrical posture.

Sitting on a chair or kneeling with cushions or on a bench are even more symmetrical postures, but there's less contact with the floor. (If this business of not being on the floor puzzles you, then you need to experience the difference between meditating on a chair and meditating on the floor.)

Posture Issues: Slumping



A slumped posture does not allow us to be alert and to remain aware while meditating. When you slump, you may also experience tension in the neck and shoulders (look at how the back of the neck is short and compressed, rather than long and open).

There are three causes of slumping:

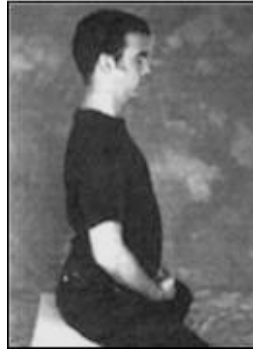
- Sitting too low
- Having insufficient tilt in your seat
- Habitual slumping

In the photograph, the meditator is sitting too low. When you sit too low, this tilts the pelvis backwards, and so the upper back has to slump forwards so that you can stay in balance. This has the effect of closing the chest and reduces your ability to breathe freely. If you sit in this posture you'll tend to feel rather dull and may even fall asleep because of the constriction in your chest.

Having your seat at the right height, but having a flat or insufficiently tilted seat, is also a cause of slumping. And sometimes slumping is just a habit.

After we've had a look at over-arching we'll look more closely at how to deal with slumping. But what we most often do is to try to hold ourselves upright by force of will. This can result in a posture that "looks" okay. If you slump, and then force yourself to sit upright, your posture might look okay from the outside, but before long those clenched muscles will start to feel pretty painful from the inside.

Posture Issues: Over-arching



Over-arching can result from:

- sitting too high
- having too much of a slope on your seat
- habitual over-arching

The meditator in this photograph is sitting too high (notice the exaggerated height of his seat). What results from this is that the pelvis tilts forwards. In order to avoid falling flat on his face, the meditator leans back, causing an exaggerated hollowing in the lower back.

There should, of course, be a normal, gentle hollowing in the lumbar region (it's called the lordotic curve) but exaggerating this will cause a painful "pinching" in the lower back. Over-arching can also occur when the angle of the seat is too steep (this also throws the weight forwards, so that the meditator has to lean back, causing excessive hollowing). And over-arching can also be a simple postural habit.

The solution for over-arching is generally to adjust the angle of the seat or (and this is more common) find a lower seat, or to make an adjustment to the angle of the pelvis.

Posture Issues: Finding the Right Height of Seat



To avoid either slumping or overarching, you need to get the height of your stool or cushion right. But how do you know when you've found the correct height for you? There is no one right height that suits everyone. Your own body height and flexibility will have a big effect on

the height that is right for you.

The best way to find the right height is having an experienced person on hand to adjust your posture and give you feedback. It's very hard to judge from the inside whether your posture needs to be changed. But here are some checks you can carry out yourself to see whether you are sitting too high or too low:

- Set up your posture, and make sure you are comfortable and relaxed.
- Make sure you aren't holding yourself forcibly in what you think is a "good" posture.
- How does it feel?
- When you relax, do you find that you slump?
- Take your hands round to the back of your lumbar spine.
- Is the lordotic curve exaggerated (over-arching)?
- Or is your lower back flattened or even convex (slumping)?
- Or do you have a normal lordotic curve when in a relaxed position (good posture)?

Posture Issues: The Angle of Your Seat



If your seat (whether that's a chair or bench) is flat, then this will cause you to slump, with all of the problems that follow from slumping. Your seat should have a slight forward angle, to allow you to be able to sit upright with no effort. As explained earlier, you can achieve a good angle when sitting on a chair by having a 1" (2- 2.5cm) block under each of the back legs.

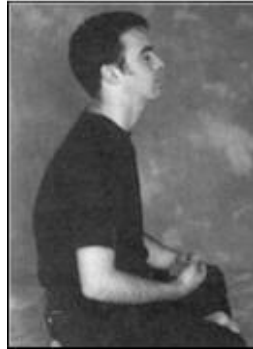
This principle still applies when sitting on cushions. If you sit towards the back of your cushion, your pelvis will tilt backwards, and you will end up slumping. In order to have a slight forward tilt to your cushion, your weight needs to be to the front of the cushion.

If your chair or stool is too steeply angled, however, then this will tend to throw your weight forward and cause over-arching.

It's ideal if you can actually try out a stool for a while. Once you've done a few 30-minute meditations on a stool, you have a good idea whether it's right for you.

An excellent solution to help you find the right angle on your seat is to use a meditation stool with rounded legs, as in the one illustrated below, which is available through our online meditation supplies store. When you sit on such a stool it automatically adjusts to the right angle for your body size, although you may still have to play around with cushions between your bottom and the stool in order to get the right height.

Posture Issues: Spotting Bad Habits



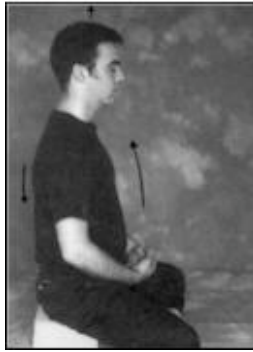
A lot of slumping and over-arching results from holding the pelvis at the wrong angle. So some slumping and over-arching can be corrected quite simply by changing your posture. Again, it's best to have an experienced meditation teacher check your posture, but if you can't manage that then there are some self-tests you can do.

Slip your hand under your buttocks (I bet you never thought meditation was going to be so much fun!). There are two little bones that protrude downwards through your buttocks. We meditation teachers have a technical term for them: we call them the "sitting bones". There's probably a more anatomically correct term, but we get by calling them sitting bones. If the top of your pelvis tilts forwards (causing your back to over-arch), then the sitting bones slide off the back of your hands. If you tilt your pelvis backwards (causing the back to slump), then the sitting bones slide off the front of your hands. When your pelvis is perfectly aligned, then the sitting bones point straight down into your hands (or your seat, once you've removed your hands!).

So, what you want is to have those sitting bones pointing straight down while your back is relaxed and at ease. This can be achieved when you have your seat at the right height for you, so play around with different heights of cushions or whatever, and see when your back is relaxed and your sitting bones are pointing straight down.

Another check is to repeat the exercise of tilting your pelvis back and forwards, but put your hands on the small of your back, noticing how it slumps when you tilt your pelvis back, and over-arches when you tilt your pelvis forward. When your sitting bones are pointing straight down, and when you have the right height and angle of seat, then the small of your back should have a gentle hollow, which is perfectly comfortable.

Meditation Posture: Shoulders

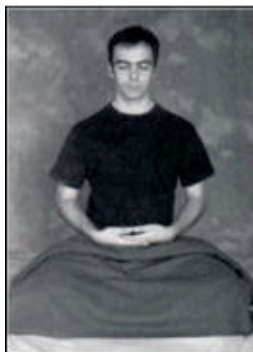


In order to create good conditions for being aware, you need to have an open chest, with a sense of spaciousness across the front of your chest between your shoulders. You can encourage this sense of spaciousness by taking a few deep breaths and filling your upper chest. As you breathe in, the front of your body will rise (see the arrow on the photograph). Feel the openness across the front of your upper chest and, at the same time, relax your shoulders, letting them fall and roll back (like the arrow behind this meditator).

If, while sitting, you feel any stretching in your shoulders, it probably means that you need to have your hands supported higher.

While meditating, you may have the sensation that your shoulders are rising and falling as you breathe in and out. If you tune into the sensation of your shoulders falling on the outbreath, you can encourage your shoulders to relax more deeply.

Meditation Posture: Hands



Your arms weigh a lot. If your hands are not supported, then your shoulders have to carry all of that weight. That means either that your shoulders will tense to bear the weight of your arms, or your shoulder muscles will be overstretched. Either way it's going to be uncomfortable.

Make sure your hands are supported. If you're in a low cross-legged position, then you may be able to rest your hands comfortably in your lap. However, you may want to have your hands supported higher. This will allow your shoulders to roll back further and be more relaxed. If you're sitting in a chair, you can usually rest your hands on your thighs, but some people with long backs may need something to support the hands. If you're kneeling, using cushions or a

stool, then you may need to have some substantial support for your hands. In this case another meditation cushion, or perhaps a sweater or blanket tied round the waist, can be used.

Meditation Posture: Head



The position of your head is very important. Your head should be balanced, and should almost seem to float effortlessly on top of your spine. You can imagine the crown of your head being drawn upwards, as if the string of a balloon were attached to it. Your chin should be slightly tucked in, and the back of your neck should be long and relaxed. So as you tuck in your chin, feel the muscles on the back of your neck relaxing and lengthening.

If your chin is tucked in too far, so that your head hangs forward, then you'll find either that you tend to feel dull and sleepy, or that you become caught up in circular, and often not very positive, loops of emotions.

If your head is tilted too far back, so that your chin is in the air, you'll find that you tend to get very caught up in thinking, and that you become rather "speedy."

But when your chin is nicely tucked in, you're able to be aware of both your thoughts and emotions without getting lost in them.

Meditation Posture: The Eyes

Many people wonder whether the eyes should be open or closed during meditation, and different Buddhist meditation traditions vary in their approach on this point. In the mindfulness of breathing and metta bhavana practices, as taught here, I would recommend having the eyes closed. This allows for greater one-pointedness of mind. The exception to this is when you find you are tired, when the eyes can be opened to provide more stimulation.

The eyes should be lightly closed, with the muscles surrounding the eyes as relaxed and soft as possible. Even though the eyes are closed, you can think of having an "unfocused gaze." This soft, unfocused state is more conducive to relaxation and mental calmness.

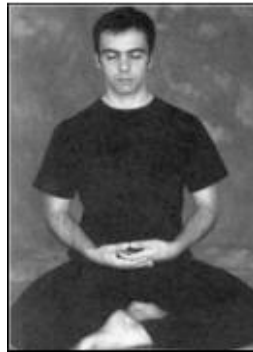
Meditation Posture: A Checklist for Your Meditation Posture



1. Adjust your cushion height so that your back is relatively straight, and also relaxed
2. Make sure that your hands are supported
3. Relax your shoulders, letting them roll back to open your chest
4. Adjust the angle of your head, so that the back of your neck is relaxed, long and open, and your chin is slightly tucked in

You're now ready to begin working on body awareness and relaxation.

Meditation Posture: Body Awareness and Relaxation



Being aware of your body in meditation is vital. It's not something separate from the meditation, and is not an optional extra. It's an integral part of the process of meditating, and it's necessary to spend some time setting up your posture and taking your awareness through your body if you want to meditate well. The more awareness that you can take into your body as you begin your meditation, the better your meditation will go. Otherwise it's a bit like trying to bake a cake without bothering to mix the ingredients first, and without checking to see that the oven is warm enough.

Set up your posture

After you have set up your posture (see previous pages), you feel free to take your awareness through your body.

Body awareness and relaxation

Start by becoming aware of your feet, and with the contact you have with the floor. Really let your awareness fill your feet. The more you become aware of your feet, the more you can allow them to relax. Let the muscles soften and lengthen.

Once you've done that for a minute or two, take your awareness from your feet through the rest of your body, "letting go" as you move through all the different muscles. Become aware of your legs, your thighs, your hips, your back, your shoulders, your arms and hands, your neck, your head and face. When you become aware of a particular area of your body, then soften, relax, let go.

Notice the subtle change in the quality of your experience as you first become aware, and then relax. Often you'll notice more energy, or tingling, or even feelings of pleasure, as your body relaxes.

Pay particular attention to the following parts of your body, where lots of tension is commonly stored:

- The back of your neck
- Your shoulders
- Your hips
- Your thighs and calves

Once you've been through your body, become aware of your body as a whole. Then center your awareness on your belly, sensing the calming, rhythmic motion of your belly as you breathe in and out.

Relax, soften, let go. Now you're ready to begin meditating.

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