

How to Sit In a Chair

[Editor's note: this is an updated version of an article with the same title by this author that appeared in *Zen Bow* some fifteen years ago. He told us that he's picked up a few more tips on chair-sitting in the intervening years that are worth sharing.]

Sooner or later in a lifetime of Zen practice, some of us will find it helpful, if not necessary, to "sit" in a chair. The reason could be transitory- wanting to maintain sesshin concentration far into the night, for example, while needing the relief of some postural variety. Or, while traveling without cushions, a chair can almost always be found. An injury (broken toe, sprained ankle, inflamed knee, etc.) could temporarily present chair-sitting as the only way to maintain daily zazen. For some, like this writer, degenerative joint problems and/or surgeries may make sitting in a chair a more or less permanent necessity.

Someone struggling through their first year or two of serious practice on a mat might think that nothing could be as challenging as getting through seemingly endless cross-legged rounds. After more than twenty years of fairly regular mat-sitting, though, I was surprised to find that chair-sitting can also be difficult and demanding. I now realize that some of this difficulty arose from attachment - I had identified "Zen meditation" with "sitting on a mat," and had grown to be comfortable with the lotus and *seiza* postures.

For a while, attached to this idea of what "real" zazen is, and physically unable to sit well on a mat, I just sat less, or not at all. But, I eventually found I couldn't accept life without silent meditation, so I grudgingly pulled up a chair. Then, over time, and after a sesshin or two, I found there were certain "knacks" involved in chair-sitting, just as there had been for zazen on a mat: little details, that when observed and repeated, make a lot of difference in being able to get centered and energetically quiet.

By reviewing the psycho-physical reasons why the lotus posture is ideal (for those who can maintain it without twitching and squirming) for zazen, we can get a window into the essentials of comprising a solid "seat" in a chair. I recall Roshi Kjolhede explaining in a *teisho* some time ago that the lotus posture is not recommended just (or even primarily) for aesthetic reasons (although there is real beauty in the balanced symmetry of a seasoned practitioner sitting cross-legged on the mat). Rather, the posture was implemented by sages millennia ago (predating even the time of Shakyamuni Buddha) because it optimally provides for stable alertness and for open centeredness. The lotus posture endows the sitter with:

- A broad, stable foundation

- Ideal support for an upright spine, encouraging its natural curvature
- The drawing together of all four limbs at the body's center (the *hara* region)
- A perfect arrangement of the body parts for effortless breathing

Seated zazen practice uncovers at least two essential elements of our being: a deep, dynamic stillness and a simple awareness. One settles into these qualities more quickly and effortlessly if a correct posture is consistently maintained during sitting. The limpid, awake, quiescent aspect of our nature won't come to the foreground if we're constantly moving and twitching during formal zazen, so an ideal sitting posture is one that will maximize the stability of the entire frame.

Since a lotus posture is optimal for providing stability, any other posture (such as sitting in a chair) puts the sitter at a modest disadvantage. To minimize this disadvantage, *don't move at all*. Important for all, this advice is crucial for those in a chair. The body and mind are not two. Any movement in the body will proliferate and amplify thought activity. The only exception would be micro-adjustments of posture back to optimal (shoulders back, chin in, etc.).

Along with stilling, the other outcome of persistent zazen is realization or insight. No one can predict when such clarifications might occur; they seem to require not only the stillness of mind discussed above, but also a fairly high level of, and capacity for, energy. An upright and stable posture will, of itself, generate substantial energy over time; an open posture allows energy to flow; and a centered posture permits more energy to course through the system without generating restlessness or agitation. So, let's examine in detail how to maximize these postural qualities of an upright, centered openness, in a chair.

First, recognize that these are general guidelines - if your particular physical situation does not permit exact adherence to them, make some adjustments, or work out something similar that makes sitting manageable for your condition. Experiment! And keep trying. (For more ideas on developing a strong posture in a chair, see Esther Gokhale's *8 Steps to a Pain-Free Back*, especially the chapter on "Stack Sitting", pp. 68-93).

The chair you use should be solidly built and not wobbly. The seat should be firm or firmly padded. Depending on the chair's height and on the length of your shin bones, you will want to place one or more cushions on the seat.

The solid, triangular base provided by the lotus posture can be approximated in a chair by having three solid points of contact: the "sitting bones" and the two feet. If your legs are short, find a chair with a seat low enough to the ground to allow your feet firmly to rest on the floor. Folks with very short shin bones who can't find an appropriately-sized chair may need to place a

flat cushion or two, or something similar, on the floor, to allow their feet to be placed firmly on them.

Ideally, your chair's height should allow you to place one or two cushions on the seat, perhaps a small flat one underneath a *zafu*. Your cushions should be placed well toward the front of the chair seat, as you won't be using the chair back at all (I'm unfamiliar with serious back problems, so I cannot comment on those who find it necessary to support the back with cushions or lean back in the chair). Arrange your cushions so they are slightly more elevated at the rear of the seat: put the flat cushion under the back end only of the *zafu*, or place a "wedge" cushion under a rectangular support. Again, *experiment*.

If your mid-back gets tired quickly, experiment with a little more elevation: you want the tops of your thighs to be slanting down, at least slightly, toward the knees. Having the centers of the hip joints higher than the tops of the knee joints opens up the *hara* region, allowing for an easier settling of energy in to this vital center; it also modestly anteverts (tilts forward) the pelvis, which, in turn, supports the natural curvature of the spine.

To avoid eye strain and make it easier to keep the eyes open, don't place the chair too close or too far from the wall – your face should be about as far from the wall or divider as it would be for someone sitting on a mat.

Make sure your chair is precisely square to the wall, so that a line between the two front or the two back legs would be parallel to the wall – doing this will help get your body facing the wall squarely. If your pelvis is aligned even slightly at an angle to the wall, there will be an unconscious effort to twist the upper body back to square, rotating it on the pelvis, and this can induce back strain.

Walk to the front of the chair, set your feet about shoulder width apart, and look down to check if the toes of each foot are equidistant from the wall (again, to set up squarely). Hinge the torso forward at the hips, thrusting the buttocks out behind, and lower them to your cushion. Straighten up. If you don't quite feel like you are right on top of your "sitting bones" (ischial tuberosity), do what folks sitting on a mat often do after first taking a seat: hinge the upper body forward all the way at the hips, thrusting the buttocks out behind (you'll feel the "sitting bones" make contact with the cushion); clasp the hands behind the back, then release the hands as you look up and follow the head up, slowly bringing the torso to vertical, keeping the "sitting bones" under you.

Next, place your hands in your lap, in the *zazen mudra* (the back of the left palm resting in the palm of the right, with the thumbs slightly touching). To avoid strain in the shoulder area, the weight of your hands should be well-supported resting in your lap; if your arms are too short to allow this to happen naturally, arrange a little cushion under your hands in the lap (there is an

old hand at the Center who uses a U-shaped “neck pillow” from an airport gift shop for this purpose).

Take a moderately deep breath, hold it for a second, and roll one shoulder from the front to the back, and then roll the other shoulder back. Exhale normally. Becoming aware of the soft palate area at the back of the roof of your mouth, allow it to float straight up a little – this will get your chin properly tucked in a bit while lengthening the back of the neck.

With this solid base in place, swing the upper body off to the left in a fairly wide arc (you won’t be able to swing out as far as one could in the lotus posture on a mat), and then to the right, and let the upper body swing back and forth in arcs of ever-decreasing amplitude until the torso comes to rest naturally and quietly in the center. If it feels necessary, roll each shoulder back again a little, and check that the soft palate is still lifting the top of your head straight up.

Lower the gaze down the wall a bit, de-focus the eyes, and you are all set for a good round of sitting!

As with sitting in any manner, you’ll become aware of your body’s posture from time to time, and if you sense it’s become misaligned, make the subtle shifts necessary. But apply such adjustments conservatively: you may find that by letting well enough alone that you just weren’t used to being in such a good form before, and that it just felt a tad strange at first.

Many of us are familiar with the deeply-moving enlightenment letters from Yaeko Iwasaki included in *The Three Pillars of Zen*. This twentieth-century bodhisattva demonstrated that effective, advanced zazen can be undertaken even while bedridden. So, we need not give up if mat-sitting is impossible.

However, there must be profound reasons why so many ancient Zen worthies (see Andy Ferguson’s *Zen’s Chinese Heritage*) crossed their legs into the lotus posture to pass from this world. No manner of sitting is pain-free, or easy, all the time. If you can sit on a mat without twitching and squirming a lot, even if it stretches your capabilities, do so- because it is proven to be the ideal form. Don’t be shy about subjecting yourself to physical therapy and/or stretching exercises under professional guidance if it might help you get back on the mat. But when you must use a chair, use it as best you can.

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