

Posture

Ines Freedman, Shelley Gault

March 26, 2026

Keywords: Buddha, Burmese style, half lotus, lotus, zafu, zabuton, seiza bench, Qigong, walking meditation, standing meditation

I hope you had a nice walking period as if you walked. So we're going to say a little bit about posture, and Shelley and I are going to kind of be going back and forth with different areas. So the Buddha taught four postures for meditation, sitting, walking, standing, and lying down. Each of them has its advantages and disadvantages, such as it's easier to be alert sitting up than lying down. Doing standing meditation is much more easy to stay awake than if you're sitting down. And yeah, most people don't fall asleep standing, though a friend of mine who used to take the bus, you know, he used to just hold on standing and he'd hold on to the handle and he could sleep, you know, but those are the exceptions.

So, you know, most important is to choose a posture that's relatively comfortable. If it's too challenging and causes too much struggle, it defeats the purpose of meditation. You know, we want to meditate with as much of a contented attitude as we can. That's what creates the conditions for meditation to deepen. So sometimes people get the idea that I'm going to sit on the floor and I'm going to sit in a perfect posture, whether it kills me, you know, and I've, you know, I've seen that happen a lot, you know, and so we're such an accomplisher sometimes in this culture. But just remembering, you know, that what's most important is what we do with our minds.

And for sitting meditation, you can use a chair, a cushion, or a bench. The main thing is to have your back upright and relaxed. In general, for, you know, any form of sitting, you know, it's good to take a little time finding our seat. You know, we might sit down, but as we connect with our body, sometimes we need to make small adjustments. You know, a couple of things that are helpful is we can take a deep breath and straighten up. And when we exhale and relax into that, it tends to bring us into a little more balanced posture.

Another way, and those of you who are sitting in a place, you can do this right now, is to, you can do it on a chair or on the floor, place your hands on either side of your hips, and then

gently lift yourself just slightly off the cushion or chair. This naturally opens the chest and brings the shoulders back a little bit. And then just let it go. And you'll see that it kind of brings you just a little more upright. And just a caveat, if we're used to slouching a lot, don't try to fix a decade or decades of slouching during this retreat. Now, you can encourage your body to be just a little more upright than usual, but just a little bit.

One other thing that's helpful, whether you're on the floor or the chair, is if you tend to have neck pain or upper mid-back pain, it can be very helpful to put a cushion on your lap. It takes some of the pressure off the neck and upper back. So, and you can experiment with how high. Some people just, you know, fold up a blanket and put it on their lap and that's enough. Some people need something a little bit higher, you know. So experiment and see, if you're having those kind of issues up here, you know, what might be more easeful for you.

You know, once we feel balanced in our posture, it's helpful to not move much, you know, which can be very helpful to develop concentration and for the body to relax. If you're constantly trying to move all the time, trying to get rid of every little discomfort, you actually don't give the body a chance to relax enough. And some of those discomforts go away on their own if we just allow them to. So don't immediately, when you feel a discomfort, move and try to fix it. But if you do need to move, it's helpful to not do it immediately, to relax into it, allow yourself to be a little uncomfortable, and then move very deliberately without rushing, maintaining the awareness throughout the entire movement of repositioning yourself.

And it strengthens your practice to stretch yourselves, to be a bit uncomfortable. But it's not so uncomfortable we're waiting for the sitting to end. So really consider that, you know, do, if you're able, something where you're not just grin and bearing the pain. You know, one way of easing into a retreat, for instance, you know, which I did for years, for instance, if you generally sit cross-legged on the floor, maybe do a few sittings on a chair, you know, or do a couple of sessions lying down. So for myself, you know, most of my retreats throughout the year, I would, you know, I can only sit on the floor for so long cross-legged. And I like using the little benches, which we'll show you in a minute or in a couple of minutes. And I would go back and forth between the bench and sitting cross-legged.

And then I would do maybe, you know, the Dharma talk I'd listen to sitting in a chair. So I had a little variety to my body, and it would allow my body to be at ease. But everybody's different, you know, and what's comfortable for, you know, for one body, it may not be the right thing for another body. So I'm going to see if I can share screen. So give me a moment. Okay, so can you see this? Give me a thumbs up. Okay, good, good. Great.

So first I'll just mention, you know, there's zafus, there's different kinds. And for those of you

who sit on the floor, I used the round one because that's all I knew about for years. And I'd been meditating for a number of years regularly, and my leg went numb after 35 minutes on the clock. I didn't need a clock to know what time it was. It was just, "Our leg's numb, it's 35."

When they switched to more of a wedge-shaped type pillow, it went to an hour instantly. It stopped cutting off the area, the circulation to that leg. You know, some people just, it depends how you're built. I'm not saying that it's going to happen for everyone, but you might want to experiment. The other thing to know about, well, one of the most common floor postures, it's usually the easiest, if you see, it's the Burmese style where one leg is in front of the other. And that's usually the easiest.

It's a very strong, you know, like a tripod. Your knees are stable. You're like three-pointed, you know. And that's a really nice, nice stable posture. Some people prefer a half lotus or a lotus. Yeah. And I think if you do, we didn't do the picture of the lotus. Okay.

And when we sit on the cushions, you know, like a round cushion, you want to sit on the front third of the zafu, you know, and on the wing-shaped one, maybe halfway, you know, so your back's in the, your buttocks from the halfway point of it. You know, as I said, it can be common for the legs to fall asleep at first. It's just because your circulation has to reroute itself, so it might take a while for it to improve. Like for me, I used to fall asleep in 10 minutes, and then as I kept practicing it took 20, and eventually, as I said, it got to 35.

But it's not going to hurt unless you have some underlying condition, and you'll know. If it just goes away when you stand up, it's fine. So it's good to not move right away, you know, and allow yourself to relax into it. And after a while, if you want, you know, an easy way to do this is you can switch which leg is in front, and the numb leg usually clears up quickly. Another little trick that can do that is, and not everybody has a feel for it, but you can actually tilt, kind of tilt your pelvis, you know, so you're kind of tucking it in, you know, and sometimes you do that for about a minute and it releases the circulation. It just changes where the circulation is being pushed on.

So, but if you need to just move your legs and then come back, just stay really mindful when you move your legs. As Shelley mentioned earlier, you know, it's really helpful to have the chin just very slightly tucked, you know, and the back of the head, you know, kind of pulling up from the middle. You know, sometimes we get into this habit, especially those of us who've been doing a lot of computer work, of like, you know, craning the neck in the opposite direction, you know. So some of those habits are pretty deep, you know, and I've had to, you know, go, "Oh yeah, yeah, that's what I'm doing."

So put the hands wherever they're comfortable, you know, you can palms up on your thighs, on your knees, or in the middle, both palms up. One way that I really like is one hand on top of the other. And let me see if I have anything. Okay. You know, I don't, it's often, a lot of people find for longer sits that crossing their hands like this, you know, interlacing the fingers, isn't so good. It kind of, again, cuts off a little circulation. But for shorter periods, it's okay, tends to be okay.

You know, and another thing that's really important when you're sitting is really notice that your belly's relaxed. So many of us are so used to keeping the belly contracted. So, you know, check your body, check that it's relaxed. And if your hips aren't flexible, but you still like sitting on the floor, you can use a support cushion under one or both knees. And just a little cushion, you know, works.

You know, most of us in this tradition, we keep our eyes closed. You know, but if you do open them, you know, sometimes if we're sleepy, it can be helpful, or some people have done Zen with their eyes open for so long that that's what's natural for them, you know, so allow your gaze to be a soft gaze on the ground. One of the things that also happens, and this is also for sitting on the floor or on a chair, is sometimes we have excess swallowing, you know, where we find we're swallowing every 30 seconds. And if that's happening, you know, we can let the tongue rest on the roof of the mouth, and that will often decrease excess swallowing. You know, not push hard or anything, just let it rest on the roof of the mouth.

So let me move on to the kneeling posture. And these kneeling benches, you know, we call them seiza benches. And they work quite well for some people, you know, sometimes, you know, much more comfortable if the hips aren't flexible. If you notice, you know, there's one on the grass, which shows like a nice side view of how you sit on it. But if you notice the one just below that, it's placed on a black zabuton, a black square cushion. And it really helps the knees to be on something soft, you know, being on a hardwood floor like that, at least for my body, my body doesn't like it. It really wants the softness.

If your ankles are a little bit tight, it can be really helpful to let your toes hang over the back. In that picture, he's not really hanging over, you know, but a little, you just position a little further back so your toes can hang over. Some people like their knees apart, some closer together. Go by comfort, just how your hips are made. And another option, if you don't have a bench but you have like a round zafu, you can use the round zafu, but instead of laying it flat, you turn it on its side so it sits between your thighs. And you can also work well with a wing-shaped pillow.

You know, and that's a really, it's the same type of posture if it works okay for your legs. So

maybe that's enough on the floor. And Shelley, I'm going to, if you'd like, talk about chair sitting. Okay, thanks, Inez. And the instructions for chair sitting are really similar to the instructions for sitting on the floor in terms of the alignment of the spine and hips. It's, as you can see in the photo there, the back, you can see that that's actually, he has his husband, Bruce, in those photos. Bruce is sitting a little bit forward from the back of the chair so that he needs to use a little bit of effort to maintain that uprightness, which helps to keep us awake during the meditation.

And it can also be useful, as in the second photo, the one on the right, to have a cushion supporting the lumbar area so that the upper back is still free, and there's that sense of uprightness, but there's a little bit of support in the low back, which I think a lot of us really benefit from. And again, it can be useful to have a cushion on your lap so that it just takes some of the stress out of the shoulders when there's a little support under the forearms and the hands. It's good to have your feet flat on the floor. And if your feet don't reach, if your chair is too high for the feet to reach the floor, it's good to put a cushion under your feet so that your thighs are parallel to the floor that you're sitting on. That really helps to alleviate tension in the thighs and knees.

And it's good not to cross your legs or cross your feet. That just cuts off circulation. And hands can be just easy in your lap, just in the same kinds of orientation that Inez suggested. I always remind people to have their arms next to the sides of their body. Sometimes people tend to kind of reach forward so that they think their hands should be on their knees rather than just on their thighs where they fit. If you reach your arms forward from your shoulders, often that creates tension in the shoulders and in the trapezius muscles in the neck and upper shoulders.

I think that's probably enough about the chair, unless you can think of something I forgot. Um, no, that's, that's, right now that's all that comes to mind also. I'm just going to mention on the picture, you know, my husband very generously had a very bad stiff neck. And he actually couldn't even straighten it fully. He's like a little tilted to the side, you know, but he still, I needed it for the next day. And so, you know, he modeled for me. Lots of generous. Yeah, yeah, lots of generosity there.

So I'll say a few words about lying down meditation. You know, some of you are doing that or some of you are doing that at times. And the primary challenge of lying meditation is staying alert. So I usually only recommend it if it's not possible to do it otherwise, or to do it only periodically. So some of the time you do something different. And, you know, it can take some practice not to fall asleep.

I know one teacher who did a three-month retreat, you know, really much longer days than what we have now. The entire retreat she did lying down. She had a really bad injury and she, you know, she had planned to do the retreat and did the whole thing and got incredibly concentrated, made, you know, no different than any other three-month retreat. It may have taken her a little bit to get into the groove because she wasn't used to it. You know, I recommend doing it, if you can, in a spot that's not the bed. You know, but if you need the bed, of course, use the bed. But make it padded enough to be comfortable.

Just so you don't associate meditation and sleep, you know, it's the primary reason. And there are three postures that we've used, you know, that can help with alertness. Feel free to do it any way you're comfortable, but just so you have some options. You know, the first option, if you can see, you know, the knees are bent and they're about 12 inches apart, and the idea is that if you fall asleep the knees collapse. You know, you won't fall asleep like this and keep them that way, you know, so it's just a little extra awareness that keeps you alert.

The other posture that's fairly common is to, in the second picture here, put the arm up so the elbow is resting on the ground, and it'll fall down if you fall asleep. So it kind of gives you a really good sense of that. And for some people, putting the elbow up is a little uncomfortable like that, and so they'll put a little cushion under their elbow. It just depends how you're built. And lastly, and this is actually the position when I've done lying down meditation that I've used. For some reason, it's the one that felt comfortable to me. It's actually the least one I ever see used, but I liked it.

And your hands are in like a traditional, like Zen meditation posture when one hand's on top of the other, and the thumbs are barely touching. And the idea is that if you fall asleep, your thumbs will, you know, they won't stay together. And that awareness of those thumbs barely, barely touching is just enough to give you that extra alertness. And you can do that with your knees bent or with your legs straight. And what I didn't put in the picture, you know, when your legs are straight, it's helpful to put a little cushion under your knees instead of leaving them really locked straight. You know, but again, whatever supports you is fine.

As you can see, he's wearing, using a cushion under the neck. You know, for myself, I've always used a cushion under my neck and a pillow under my knees. Okay. I've often, one of the other things I've done in retreat as I've gotten older is I do my last sit this way. So I think that this is, you know, that's enough of lying down. We'll have time for, you know, after Shelley does her next piece, we'll have time for Q&A. So go ahead, Shelley, with standing.

Okay, yeah. Standing, and I just, I really want to encourage people to use a standing posture as a relief posture and also just to play with it as, you know, as Inez talked about with

the walking, because you kind of need to engage attention to a lot of different things when you're standing that can really keep you in the present, in the present moment. And often we talk about it being good for sleepiness, and of course that's, you know, unless you're one of those people who can fall asleep standing up, which are quite rare, I think, it really is useful when you're in one of those periods when you just can't seem to stay awake. And it's good for changing which muscles we use when we're, you know, when we're sitting, when we're formally practicing, giving relief to the knees and the hips. There's so much to pay attention to that I think it really helps with wakefulness.

And the way that we usually recommend doing standing meditation is to stand with your feet either shoulder width or a little bit further apart. And you're welcome to stand now if you'd like to and just try it. A little bit wider than shoulder width gives you stability. Your hands can hang loosely at your sides, or they can be just clasped really loosely in front of the pelvis, if that's more comfortable, whichever creates least strain in the shoulders. And your back is upright, and if you can just tuck the hips a little bit forward so that you kind of create a straight back, but there's a little bit of a lumbar curve there.

And don't ever hyper-extend your knees. Keep them soft. Hyper-extending is, you know, going to cause stress. In some Qigong meditations, the knees are slightly bent and the feet are even wider apart than slightly bigger than wider than shoulder width. Maybe they go about two feet apart, about six inches beyond each shoulder, depending on how wide your shoulders are. And some people find this a more stable posture just because the legs are a little bit further apart.

And it naturally kind of leads to tucking your buttocks a little bit. So you might try that if you don't feel stable when you're standing straighter with the legs a little bit closer together. And it's good to have your head centered over your shoulders and your gaze, again, slightly ahead of you but downwards. Some people are able to do standing meditation with closed eyes, and other people like to keep their eyes just open a little bit, but with the gaze very soft and just not really looking at anything, just having enough to keep your balance. But don't extend the neck forward if you're, you know, if you're looking down at the floor. If you have your eyes open and are looking, just tilt the head, but keep the back of the neck long and don't slouch forward with the neck.

Hope that makes sense. Just extending the neck really creates a lot of tension in the back of the neck and the trapezius muscles. So lifting the crown of the head, like there's a string tied to it, that kind of helps to keep you from going forward, kind of slumping forward. And if you're using standing as a relief posture from either sitting on the floor or in a chair, to move

from sitting to standing, whether you're on the floor or in a chair, use that same, you know, really mindful slow movement as you move from one posture to the other. And then again, when you sit down again, if you're just standing for a short period, again, just very mindfully move, knowing what muscles are being activated as you move back into a seated position.

I find standing meditation really beneficial at times. And so I do recommend that you kind of, you know, play with it from time to time. It's not, you know, the Buddha said we can, standing, sitting, walking, lying down, they're all, you know, completely legitimate meditation postures. So I think that's all I have for standing, unless you have anything you want to add, Inez.

You know, I'm actually not sure whether you said it or not, but for some of us, due to balance issues or back problems, it really helps to put your hands on the back of a chair in front of you and to give you that extra support. Like for me, that's how I've done it. So, you know, I can do it without for about 10 minutes, but holding something in front of me is really helpful. Great, thanks.

And I had one other little thing, you know, that I realized I wanted to say about chair sitting. And it's not, you know, some people have found this really helpful, so I didn't want to not say it. If you have a lot of problems sitting in a chair in terms of your low back and, you know, just can't get comfortable, and the floor is uncomfortable and you don't want to just lie down only, for some people, if you take a chair, a hardback chair, you know, that you, you know, kind of tuck your butt all the way back so it's really tucked in, and then spread your legs so they're actually about three feet apart, that having them really apart often releases a lot of the tension in the low back. So experiment with that, you know, if you're having a lot of low back issues.

So that was it. That was what I had. Thank you for saying that. And that's actually how I sit in a chair. I definitely have my, it's very helpful to me. Great, great. And so right now we have a time for questions. So if anybody has any questions about your own posture or anything general about posture, you know, use your Zoom hand or your real hand. Juan.

Yeah, thank you. Well, I'm not so sure because it's more a question of the internal posture. I'm not so sure if this is the right space to ask this. But I'm thinking about, personally, I get this feeling that I'm kind of claustrophobic while I'm practicing. So I'm not so sure why, can, yeah, if you can say some suggestions or something regarding that, regarding that internal posture. Thank you.

Yeah, it's a little bit different, but I'll go ahead and say something, you know. You need to

describe it a little bit better. What do you mean by claustrophobic? Do you feel like you can't get air, or something else? Yeah, that's pretty much it. I get the feeling that I'm kind of trapped inside of me, kind of. So I tend to get a little bit anxious about that.

Yeah, yeah. So one of the things that's helpful those times is just to do some purposeful breaths, you know, so you're breathing on purpose. And that often gives you, takes you out of that kind of feeling, you know. Experiment with that, and then when we meet, you know, later give us feedback and see how that goes for you. I don't know if you've tried that before. Perfect. Thank you. Yeah, you're welcome.

Elaine. Thank you. Inez, you mentioned having some lower back issues, and I definitely have that. I pretty comfortably sit on a cushion on the floor, but the walking meditation, which I for years loved, but it's hard for me now. So this morning, for example, I would do it a little bit, but then it would start hurting. So I would do some yoga that stretches, and then I would do some walking. And I tried different paces. But then I needed to go back and do the yoga stretches.

So what part of the back? Low back. The very low back or kind of like, you know, where the hump usually is, the lower part of the hump. I have a major hump now, but I think pretty close to where the hump is. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. So one of the things that's really helpful is take like a really large shawl and roll it up. You can use a blanket and tie it around your waist. And so at the sides of your, you know, there'll be like these nice little rests for your elbows. And then, you know, you can, and then you can rest your hands on the knot.

Huh, okay. Well, I should get a picture of that. Yeah, and that, for me, that was a huge save my ass, you know. Yeah. And, you know, but also, you know, one of the things that I still do when I'm not doing that is, you know, I might do like a couple of minutes of walking back and forth. Then I do mindful stretching downwards, letting my hands, you know, I interlace my elbows, you know, so I can just hang in waterfall, you know, just forward, you know, and, and for my back, that works great. For some people's back, that's the wrong thing. So you have to know yourself, you know, experiment. But one of those, you know, might be helpful. So see how it goes. Thank you. Yeah, you're welcome.

Anyone else? So for any other questions today, Shelley will be doing a drop-in group, as we said, at 6:15 Pacific. And so feel free to bring any question of any kind to her. Related to practice, that is. Great. So I'll give it just a moment if there's anyone else. Great. Great. Right, so I hope some of this has been helpful and we'll see you in the hall. Great, yeah.