



How to Sit in Sitting Meditation

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When it comes to meditation, what pops up in your mind? Just google it through image search, and the screen will show lots of images of people meditating in the seated posture. Most people generally consider meditation as sitting meditation even though there are many other types of meditations.

Do you practice sitting meditation? Then what posture do you usually use for your sitting? I used to practice meditation in a full lotus posture. During an intensive retreat in Korea, I sat in the full lotus posture for an hour, with a left foot facing upwards and the next hour with my right foot upwards. Even though my knees and ankles started to hurt, I thought the pain was necessary for the gain from sitting meditation. One day, I twisted my ankle, so I had to walk with a limp and could not comfortably sit for meditation for several weeks. This happened because I firmly believed the full lotus posture was the best posture for sitting meditation.

Later in the USA, I encountered many meditation practitioners with various postures in sitting meditation. Many of them brought their own cushions for their practice such as thick and round, crescent-shaped, and big brick-like ones, and some of them used a chair. From that time, one question kept coming to my mind: what is the best posture for sitting meditation?

There are five main postures for sitting meditation: full lotus, half lotus, Burmese, on a stool, and on a chair. These five postures all look different. That is why the postures have different names. It is right as comparing the legs for the postures. However, if we change the focus from on the legs to on the torso, it is not that right.

When looking closely, all the postures are the same in the torso area. That is why the method of sitting meditation universally tells us to “sit upright,” or “sit tall.” It also tells us to “straighten your back,” “straighten your spine,” “relax your

shoulders,” and “tuck in the chin.” These directions suggest that all the postures are the same. Thus, the shift from the legs to the head and torso gives us a hint of a new approach of how to sit in sitting meditation.

The new approach begins with a point of view called “uprightness.” The very uprightness is a unique expression of human beings. As human beings became upright, they changed the evolution of humanity with the use of tools by hands that were free, and the use of languages by vocal development and formed a civilization, distinct from other species. The universality of how to sit in sitting meditation starts from a human evolutionary point of view called “*li* (立),” which means “stand” or “upright” in traditional Chinese character (see Fig. 1). The metaphor of “*li*” can apply to the sitting posture. The first keyword of sitting meditation, “sit comfortably,” can interact with *li* “*li*” regarding three aspects of ontology, somatics, and semantics.

Li 立, a logographic character, depicts “mankind standing on earth” (立; 立 depicted as an oracle bone script). The character *Li* 立 has a long history, more than a thousand years from the development of human language. If we consider evolution as a human being with bipedalism, the history must go far more than a million years. A very similar English term for *li* 立 is the word “exist,” which etymologically means “stand out” with two segment combinations of “ex-” for “out” and “ist” for “stand.” *Li* 立 and exist share the same concept of stand. I humbly surmise that while exist in the Western vocabulary emphasizes “stand out” (of the God/Absolute), *li* 立 in Eastern vocabulary emphasizes the relationship between the Human Being and the Earth (or the Universe).

Ontologically in *li* 立, all the postures are only possible on the ground (earth). Won Buddhist teachings say “It is owing to the ground of the earth that one can support one’s body to live” in the Chapter of the Grace of Heaven and Earth. The essence of grace comes with this question: “If we cannot live without it, what grace is greater than it?” The grace in Won Buddhism emphasizes the ontological aspect of our living. There is no exception to this Grace. Sitting meditation posture is also possible on and by grace,

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Fig. 1 Old shapes of uprightness (*Li* 立) in Chinese characters

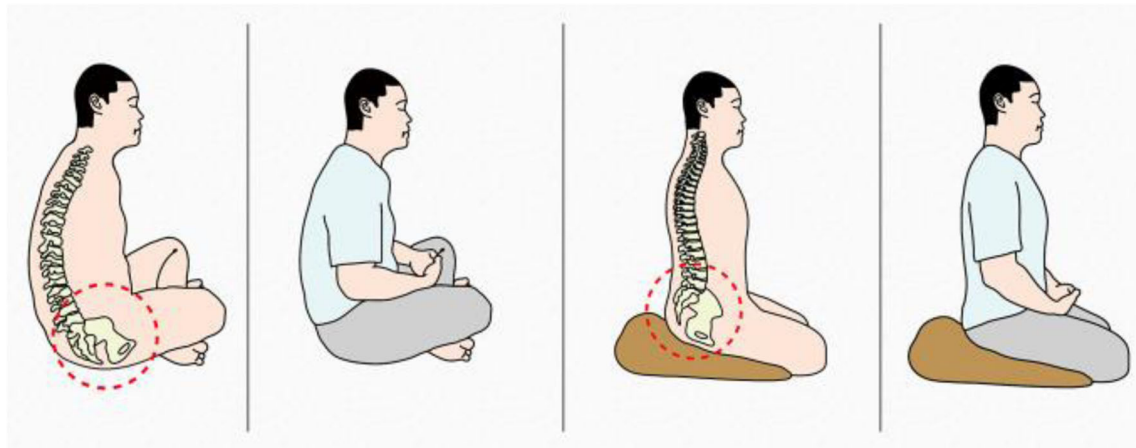


Fig. 2 C-shaped posture and upright posture. Illustrated by Hye-jeong Yoon

namely the ground, and the ground includes cushions, chairs, and props for sitting meditation.

Without understanding the essence of grace, it is easy for practitioners to regard that *I* am practicing sitting meditation *by myself*. As understanding and feeling the grace grow, their attitude to practice changes to considering it was *due to the grace* that practice is possible. The grace of the Earth by *li* 立 makes sitting meditation possible, and cushions and chairs are part of the Earth supporting our practice. That is, the grace is always everywhere in us, with us, and around us.

From a somatic view, while sitting on the cushion or chair for meditation, the torso area of the body is not sitting, but standing and upright (立). However, many practitioners show poor posture in sitting meditation. One of the main reasons is the position of the tailbone. If the tailbone is located inward, the spine becomes C-shaped (see Fig. 2). While most meditation practitioners with a C-shaped spine will try to straighten the waist and back by tensing and pushing the back forward and slightly upward. If they keep doing it during a long sitting, the back will hurt. Alternatively, if they stop it, the waist falls backward, and the head and jaw come forward, producing the C-shaped spine.

The easiest way to sit comfortably is to place the tailbone toward the ground with an extra cushion on the buttocks. Some people are very flexible in their bodies, so they do not

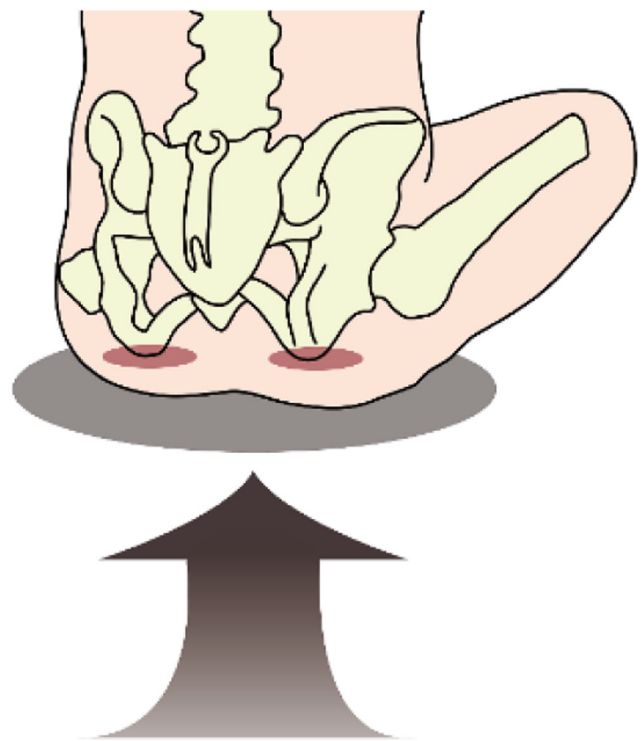


Fig. 3 Illustration of the tailbones and the ground supporting each other. Illustrated by Hye-jeong Yoon

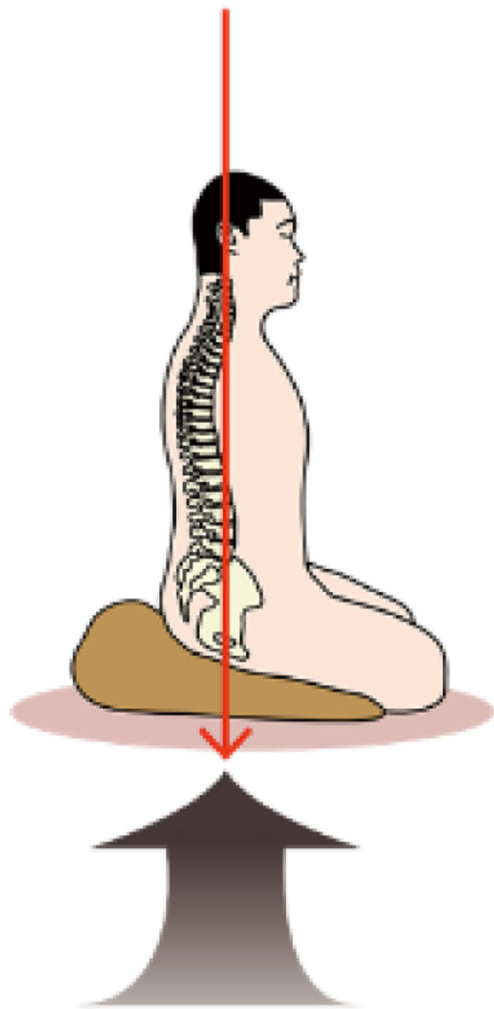


Fig. 4 Illustration of vertical alignment mutually supported by the tail bones and the ground. Illustrated by Hye-jeong Yoon

need any extra cushion for sitting, but they are in the minority. Most people need an extra cushion for a better sitting posture. The buttocks are like feet. As shoes provide a little height in the heel area, the cushion provides a little height in the buttocks area for a better sitting posture. Just find a cushion on

which you can place the tailbone comfortably downward to achieve a good sitting meditation posture. The tailbone is called “sacrum,” so the sacred posture starts with the tailbone on the ground, which helps the spine naturally go upright. The second essential part are the two sitting bones. While the spine is aligned well, the sitting bones press the ground (or cushion/ chair) and the whole body creates the state of “uprightness” (*li*). By the way, the method of sitting meditation usually tells us to “straighten the back.” This direction is sometimes ill-advised for a better posture. The central supporting part of the body weight is not the back but the center of the torso. Thinking of the back as supporting the body in a sitting posture is like making the heel support the body in standing posture. Supported by the heel, the body in standing posture is unstable. If someplace between the heel and the toes is supporting the body, the standing posture becomes more centered and stable. It is the same for a sitting posture. The sitting bones provide centeredness and stability in a sitting posture (see Fig. 3). The center of the body vertically above the sitting bones supports the weight of the body, so that the practitioner can feel vertically aligned in a sitting posture with little or no tension in their back (see Fig. 4). Letting the tailbone fall downward, the torso is standing and centered, and can feel the center of the body supporting the body. These postural changes lead to sitting comfortably from a somatic view. It is a straightforward but practical method for sitting meditation. The buttocks in sitting are functioning like the feet in standing. Therefore, while sitting in meditation, we are standing on the buttocks.

From the perspective of ontology and somatics, *li* 立 shows the relationship between the human being and the Earth, and implies we were standing and upright in the sitting meditation (see Fig. 5). Confucius said that he became *li* 立 at 30 (三十而立), which implies that he vowed to achieve sainthood or Buddhahood from a Buddhist perspective. In Mahayana Buddhism, a vow is the most fundamental aspect of practice. Buddhist practitioners begin their practice with a sincere vow or intention. *Li* 立 also has another meaning in semantics. Soto Zen in Buddhism emphasizes shikantaza (只管打坐) or just sitting. In this view, just keeping the uprightness (*li*) in sitting

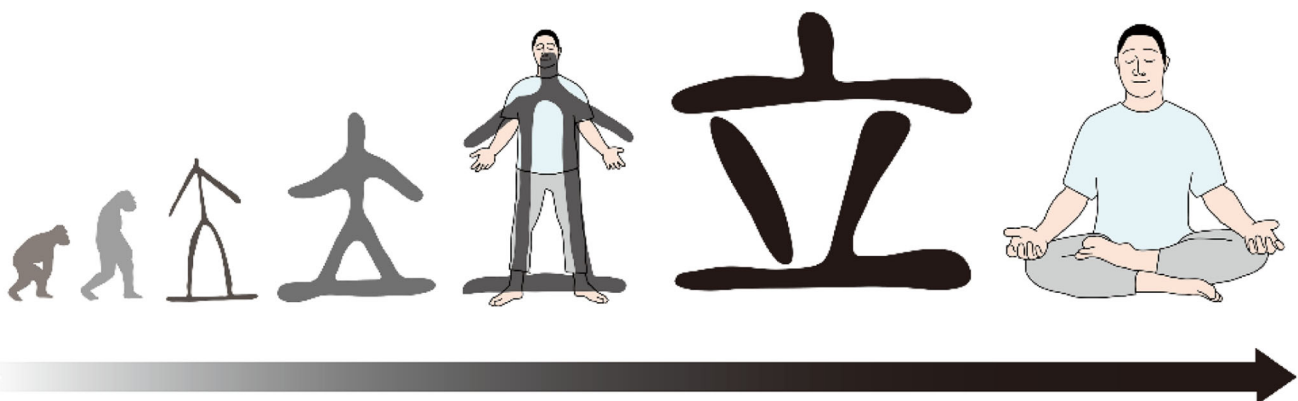


Fig. 5 Human evolution of uprightness and its application to sitting posture. Illustrated by Hye-jeong Yoon

meditation is the essence of meditation, which may result in the emergence of enlightenment and the appearance of Buddha-nature.

Sitting postures are different in our legs but the same in our torso. Sitting meditation is not just sitting, but also standing externally and internally. Uprightness (*Li 立*) is not the form of a particular posture in sitting meditation, but the essence of the posture. The first meaning is to stand upright on and by the Earth in an ontological sense. Every moment we are supported by the Grace of Heaven and Earth. The second is to upright the body as a whole in somatics. While practicing sitting meditation, we are always standing on the cushion with the buttocks, the new feet. The third is to build spiritual growth through *li 立* in semantics as if human beings built up spiritual civilization by standing up in evolution. In all, sit as if standing in the Grace of the Heaven and Earth.

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