

Make The Best Meditation Seat:
The Samādhi-Sausage
&
How to Sit

Bhikkhu Subhūti

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Tutorial on How to Sit

Many times I have given advice to yogis on how to sit properly and I have received raving success. In fact, I asked one fellow student to model for the pictures you will see in this article and he was absolutely amazed at how comfortable he was as soon as he sat down. He spoke loudly with joy and excitement as soon as he was seated in the Samādhi-Sausage, which prompted other people to peek inside the room to see what all of the commotion was about.

(Note: The shirt was raised up and tied to reveal his posture and it is not normal for him to be like that!)



Illustration 1: Samādhi-Sausage and yogi

Meditation Cushions are Expensive

You can pay a small fortune for meditation pillows (zafu, or cosmic cushion) and a base (zabuton) to sit on. A set might run you well over \$115 USD. Not only that, you will need to travel with a beast of a setup whenever you want to sit. It is best to use what is around you wherever you are. Do you really think that the monks of the Buddha's time traveled with meditation cushions and bases? Did you know it is against the Buddhist monastic rules to sit on cotton/kapok stuffed pillows? As an alternative, or a first-ative, I suggest using a folded or rolled blanket for a cushion and base. I recommend the blankets that are thick and heavy, but not so big in square footage, that has a furry material that is similar to rug. These blankets are about \$5 USD in Myanmar, often have designs with pictures on them, but any blanket will do. I do not recommend shopping for a blanket, and suggest one to use the blanket that is

available at the place your are living at or visiting. The blanket shown below is slightly too bulky, but it works. Don't try to search for the perfect blanket. Instead, just set one up and use it.



Illustration 2: Base blanket

Before we get into how to make your own “Samādhi-Sausage” from a blanket, we should understand some important things.

Physics: May the force *not* be with you!

$$\text{Force} = \text{Pressure} \times \text{Area}$$

The more surface area that has contact to support your weight, the less force will be applied to the surface area. That is called pressure, PSI or “pounds per square inch.” Gravity is the force we are fighting against. If you weigh 100 kg, 100 kg is not being pressed onto your cushion or the floor by your rear-end, thighs and ankles individually. However, as a whole, 100 kg is pushing down onto the floor directly and indirectly through the cushion(s). Your body weight is distributed by your sitting posture. If you were to lie down, the weight of your body would be spread out. You would therefore feel less pressure. That is why you can float on your back when you lay in the water. That is probably why you like to sleep in the lying down posture. If you were standing on a single tippy-toe, your weight would be concentrated on a

small area. This posture would get painful very quickly and that is probably why ballerinas are not tall and fat!

So the total weight of the body is called a force. The weight of your body is spread between two feet. If you stood on two bathroom scales, each of the scales would read half of what you know it to be, but the two added together would equal your total weight. This is important to understand weight distribution. If you rested on your hands and feet, the four scales would show less for each scale, but still equal your weight when added together. The more contact points, the less weight will be pushed on each of those points.

In the sitting posture, the weight on your ankles is the force while the pressure of your ankles on the floor is “pressure”. The weight of your rear-end is a force, while the weight of your rear-end pressing down on the pillow is “pressure”. If you weigh 60 kg, then 60 kg will be distributed on the floor and cushion in one form or another. If you were to put a scale under each contact point of your sitting posture, you could add up all of the scales and get your total body weight. Some parts of your body will bear more weight than others.

Now try to understand that the more surface area, the more distributed your weight will be. That is why Eskimos can walk on top of snow with snow shoes without sinking. A snowboard and surfboard can do the same. Conversely, a nail one hammers into a wall converges into a point and has very little surface area. Because of this, it can penetrate or sink into a piece of wood much easier than your finger (which is wider). If you remove the point on the nail, then you are increasing the surface area. And if you do that, it will be more difficult to hammer the nail.

Look at the formula again:

$$F = P \times A$$

$$\text{Force} = \text{Pressure} \times \text{Area}$$

Force is gravity, or how much you weigh.

We can also use basic algebra to change the formula around to solve for pressure. Pressure is what we feel when we sit. It is the force of our body against the surface of the objects we sit on: the floor pillow, base, etc. Even if you don't remember basic algebra, just trust me.. it's correct.

$$\text{Pressure} = \text{Force} / \text{Area}$$

You might be familiar with the term PSI or "pounds per square inch." If you see the word "per" that means the first thing is divided by the second thing. Pounds per square inch means, pounds divided by square inches. Square inches is another name for surface area. PSI is how to keep track of your tire pressure. So what would 20 PSI be? It depends on the surface area or the force (weight of the object). Let us take a simple equation using 10 square inches.

$$20 \text{ PSI} = 200 \text{ lbs} / 10 \text{ square inches.}$$

If we increase the surface area or square inches five times to equal 50, then we will end up with 4 PSI or one fifth the pressure.

$$4 \text{ PSI} = 200 \text{ lbs} / 50 \text{ square inches.}$$

A snowshoe can increase the surface area 8 or 10 times and therefore reduce the pressure to one tenth of what it was before. That is how Eskimos can walk on top of the snow.

If we were to take a nail which has a surface area of .01" and we put 20 lbs of force to it, the formula for pressure would be:

$$2000 \text{ PSI} = 20 \text{ lbs} / .01 \text{ square inches}$$

The answer is 2000 PSI with a mere 20 lbs of force!!! I think my mother could hammer a nail into a piece of wood if I asked her to do so! So if the contact point is small, then a lot of

pressure can build up quickly. My ankles are usually the first to get painful even though there is very little weight on them. The reason is that a ball, or the ball of your ankle only has a very small contact point. If it sometimes feels like someone is driving a nail into your ankle it might be because you have a similar contact point as a nail.

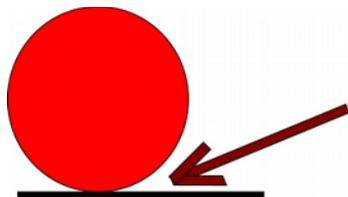


Illustration 3: A ball has a single contact point on a plane

Remember this little physics lesson while you explore a new meditation seat. If you can sit on the folded blanket without a pillow, then this might be good because your legs, and rear-end can work together to distribute the weight nicely and evenly. If you were to sit on a Zen meditation bench, a majority of your weight would be pressing against a small bench. That is why Zen meditation benches do not work well with me. If you are using a pillow, most of your weight is pressing on one small part of your sitting area, your rear-end. So if we sit with our legs, feet, and thighs having contact with the floor, then we can distribute the weight better using the whole body in a “holistic” approach to weight distribution. All that said, some parts can comfortably take more weight than others. Our rear-end can take a majority of our weight and we were designed by nature to sit on it. So how can we sit without pain? We need to observe what parts of the body get pain and how to fix it. Usually, reducing the pressure is the cure.

Sitting Posture: Burmese Style

When I was a lay person, I used to think it was cool to meditate in full or half lotus because I read or assumed it was cool to do... But really, there was no real personal reason other than just being a guy and internally saying, “I’daman!” All that said, it is recommended in the Buddhist Pāḷi Commentary texts and I recently revisited the lotus posture to evaluate it for this article. Basically, if you can sit in full lotus without a pillow and your knees are not in the air, it is quite good. You are also likely to survive without a wedge to prop your back up (a wedge explained later in this document). So, if you are part of the elite few who find it comfortable for

at least an hour's time, then I recommend it. If it is not comfortable for at least an hour, or you find it less comfortable than the other postures discussed in this article, then I do not recommend it.

Meditation is about sitting comfortably without the posture being a distraction. I recommend trying to sit in the "Burmese Style" posture. To do this, put one foot inwards towards your groin and then place the other foot inwards towards the groin, but just ahead of the other foot. Both feet are touching the floor and not under your thighs or on top of each other. It is a flat posture and gives one a stable base, similar to the lotus variation.

Indian style is not recommended either because your ankles will be underneath your legs. You will get ankle pain because your thighs will press on your ankles which are connected to the floor. Therefore, you are increasing the pressure maybe tenfold. Why? Sit in the Burmese posture and pay attention to how much body surface area is connected to the floor and supporting your weight. Now sit Indian-style and put your ankles underneath your thighs. Pay attention to reduction of surface area that is now connected to the floor. Less surface area means more pressure. Not only that, as I said before, some body parts can bear-up a lot of weight while others parts cannot. The balls of your ankles are not designed to take lots of pressure to the floor.

In the Burmese-style, no part of your body is resting on top of another part of the body. If there is a situation like this, then it is adding force and pressure on these parts. It makes sense not to do it, but people do and then complain about pain or accept the pain. Often, yogis complain about pain, and the teacher says this or that but does not say, "Show me your sitting posture." *This is a very important question to ask!* What if someone was complaining about pain, but was sitting in full lotus posture because he read that it was a good thing to do but had good potential to get samādhi?



Illustration 4: Burmese posture and ankle-towel

What You Knee to Know

You should not have your knees dangling in the air. If your knees (or the fleshy leg part just before the knee joints) are not flat on the ground, then you are having your tendons (that are not stretched yet), hold your knees in the air. It is just like holding your arm stretched out in front of you. It will make you tired after five minutes and your knees will also get tired if they are not supported. So get a pillow and stick it underneath one or both knees. Although it seems weird, one pillow under one knee will cause the other knee to fall down to the floor. If you feel unbalance, you can have one pillow for each knee. But only one is necessary.



Illustration 5: Knee pillow

Having a pillow under your rear-end can help get the knees down as well. If you still want to use a pillow for your rear-end, you can do so instead of, or in addition to knee pillows. The higher the pillow for your rear-end, the more your knees will go down. Take note that this is just a way of speaking. It is not really the knees that need to touch the floor, but the thigh-meat right before the knee joints. However, a pillow can cause the knee joint to rest the floor and that might cause knee pain. This is a disadvantage of using a pillow for the rear-end. Not only that, your weight distribution will be reduced which will cause more pressure. However, the Samādhī-Sausage can solve all the problems, so try this before you try all of the alternatives.

Who's On First?

Make yourself a base. You can buy a zabuton, for a huge amount of money, but I prefer a folded blanket. They are easy to find anywhere. Sometimes too much fluff will cause pain, so try to experiment with different size blankets and fluffiness. Some people use carpet padding from a carpet store. Others use these rubber puzzle squares found in many meditation centers. A camping mat or yoga mat can work too. Some use rubber foam cushions which are available in the East, but maybe difficult to find outside of furniture upholsterers. Tired of suggestions? A blanket is easy and usually readily available wherever you are. It is usually the right amount of cushion too. Not too much, not too little. If you need to buy a blanket, they are cheap and available at any good-will or thrift store (a used clothing store). A yoga mat was used as a base for these pictures because it was in the room where the pictures were taken. Sit on the floor and pay attention to the contact points. Then sit on a soft blanket-base and pay attention again. You will notice that there are more contact points or wider contact points. That is why a cushion helps relieve pressure.

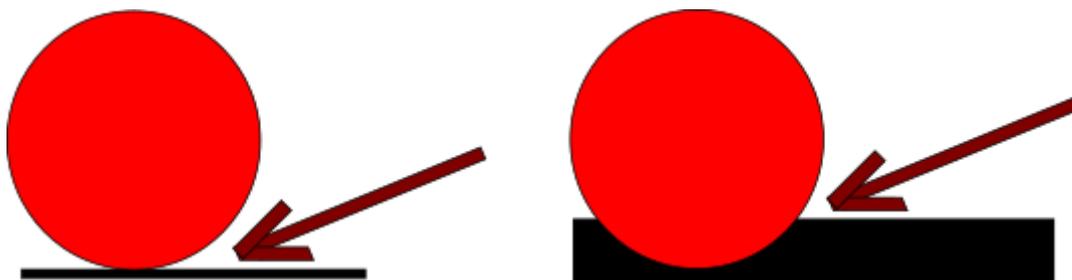


Illustration 6: Contact area of a ball on hard surface versus cushion

Aim for a 20° or 30° angle. If you wish you can get a piece of plywood and prop it up on an angle by sticking wood or a towel underneath the back end of it. You do not need to construct anything. You can wrap it in a blanket and leave some extra blanket in the back to prop it up on an angle. (no picture given)

If you do not have the luxury of making an angle from a wooden base, you are best recommended to find an inclined hill. This is a first and ideal choice, but outdoor meditation may not be available for you.

You can also fold your blanket into a staircase and sit on that. (no picture given).

Wedge Method

Because my knees are not raised in the air and I like to be portable. I often use a piece of folded or rolled cloth (often my robe) and lean forward and place it into the space created by leaning forward. This props up my back, but because I am still partially on the floor, the weight is nicely distributed. Even the smallest amount of cloth can help keep your back straight and reduce back pain.



Illustration 8: Lifting up, before insertion



Illustration 7: Insertion



Illustration 9: Final posture

Ankle Pain

Your ankles should be turned in as much as possible so that the top of your feet are touching the floor or close to it. This will turn the ball of your ankle away from being perpendicular to the floor and relieve much of the pressure. If your ankles cannot do this and you experience pain before one hour, try to fold a small towel just two or three times and put it underneath your shin (not the ankle). This quarter inch of height can do wonders for your ankle. It should not

lift your shin up in the air, it should just reduce the pressure on your ankle. Too much height for the shin can just cause pain problems in your shins. A small blanket was used instead (because that's what was in the room). The ankle is not positioned correctly, but the shin support can help reduce the pressure on the ankle ball. The pictures below show the wrong and right ankle posture. The correct one (if possible) is on the right.



Illustration 10: Wrong ankle position



Illustration 11: Right ankle position (tilted)



Illustration 12: Ankle towel

The Samādhi-Sausage

Before you set anything up other than your “base-blanket” or “base-cushion,” try making a Samādhi-Sausage. Yes, you’ve guessed it. I made this term up. I was going to call it the Cosmic-Sausage, but Cosmic is already trademarked for meditation cushions and I was familiar with their Cosmic Cushion because I used to buy them for other yogis at cost when I was a lay person. A Cosmic Cushion / Zabuton set will cost you over \$115 today. The owner / creator is a nice guy and works right near a Goenka center in Shelburne Falls, MA. He was a

licensed massage therapist and developed this cushion so he could sit longer. His invention eventually developed into a company and has been copied by many. (see <http://www.sunandmoonoriginals.com>). The Samādhi-Sausage hopes to accomplish the same effect for a fraction of the price.

To make a Samādhi-Sausage, fold a thick blanket a few times to attain a 3.5 to 4 feet long length. It should be the same size or slightly larger as the two corners of your knees in a sitting posture. Then roll your blanket into a sausage.



Illustration 13: rolled sausage and approximate size proportion

Sit on the floor in Burmese style and put the center of the sausage behind your rear-end.



Illustration 14: Sausage lift

Then lean forward so that your rear-end is partially, but not fully in the air. Then take the ends of the sausage and pull it into your rear-end to fill and support that angle you just made. Wrap the ends of the sausage around your body and then lift up your thighs and put them underneath. *If possible, sit on the inside edge of the sausage, so that you are tilted forward just a little bit.* If you can, imagine being a 200 foot giant sitting inside of half of a football stadium. That is how you should sit on your sausage. If you want to sit squarely on the sausage to give you more height, you can use the wedge method mentioned previously by putting the wedge on top of the sausage. In both cases, you need to be tilted forward to protect your back.

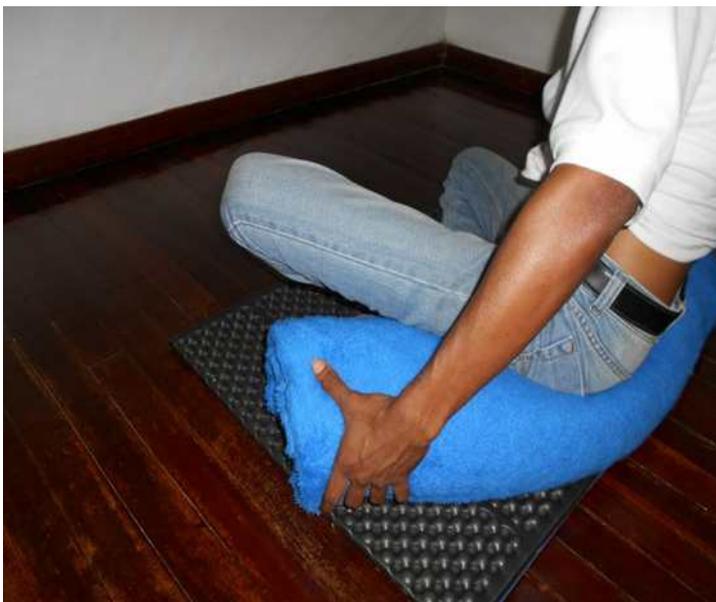


Illustration 15: Placing the sausage under the left thigh

You can adjust the height of the legs by how much sausage you put underneath them. In the picture below, you can see that there is only a fraction of the sausage under the legs. This brings the knee lower to the ground to increase the contact points for the lower part of the leg. The less flexible you are, the higher your knees should be.

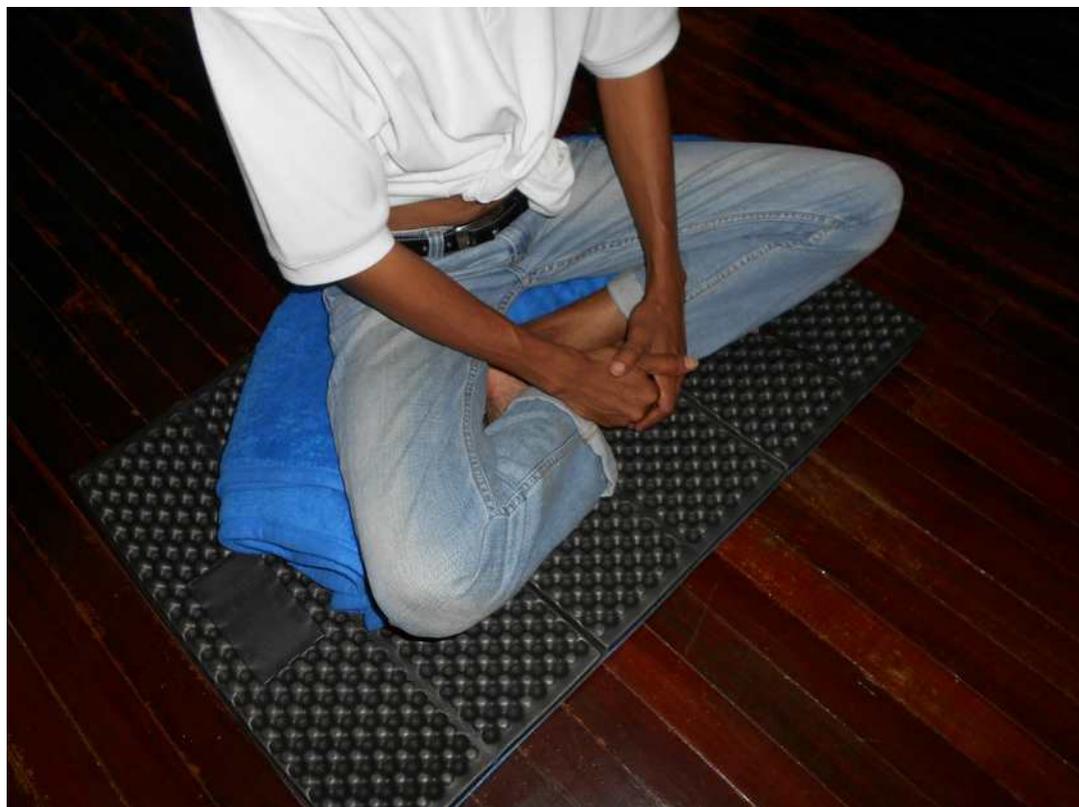


Illustration 16: Samādhi-Sausage in action

As you can see in the picture. The body is tilted a little forward, which removes the need for an angled piece of plywood. This forward-angle will help reduce/prevent your lower back pain just like the wedge does. The rear-end and thighs have continuous contact with the Samādhi-Sausage and the Samādhi-Sausage transfers that weight to the floor. The ankles are relieved of much of the supporting weight because of the height of the Samādhi-Sausage. Therefore all problems are solved and you can be a happy meditation yogi again! Look at the pictures once more and grab a blankie!

May the force *not* be with you!

With Mettā

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Please leave a comment below about your experience!