

Sunan (Practices) of the Prophet and Ahl al-Bayt: Sitting in Salāh

There are three moments during prayer where one is required to put him or herself in a sitting (*julūs*) position during *ṣalāh*. The first is the sitting between the two prostrations (*al-jalsah bayn al-sajdatayn*). The second is the sitting for *tashahhud*. These two instances of *julūs* are considered required. The third sitting is after the second prostration in every cycle (*rak'ah*) without *tashahhud*. The *fuqahā'* are divided on this issue. Many of them believe that one must – either as a definitive *fatwā* or as an obligatory precaution – rise up from the prostration and come to a sitting position for a moment before standing up for the next *rak'ah*, such as Sayyid Sīstānī. Other jurists, such as Sayyid Khū'ī and Shaykh Ishāq Fayyād, believe that although this sitting, called *jalsah al-istirāḥah*, is a *sunnah* (pl. *sunan*) of the Prophet Muhammad (ṣ), it is not obligatory.

In terms of posture while sitting, there is, in fact, no particular position that is required. You may sit however you like, so long as '*urf* (custom) would say that you are sitting, and it will be considered valid. However, there is a particular way that the *Sharī'ah* has recommended to sit in accordance with the prophetic *sunnah*. According to the *sunnah*, you should sit placing your weight on your left thigh with both legs underneath your thighs and to your right; the top of your right foot will rest on the sole of your left foot. In the '*urf* of Shī'ī *fuqahā'*, this is referred to as *jilsah al-tawarruk*.

There is a famous *ḥadīth* reported by a prominent companion of Imam Ja'far al-Ṣādiq ('a) by the name of Ḥammād b. 'Īsā. During one of their meetings, the Imam asks Ḥammād if he knows how to perform *ṣalāh* properly. Ḥammād responds that he has memorized the Book of *Ṣalāh* by another scholar, Ḥarīz b. 'Abdallāh. ((Ḥarīz b. 'Abdallāh al-Sijistānī was a major scholar and transmitter of *ḥadīth* contemporary to Imam al-Bāqir and al-Ṣādiq ('a) and one of Ḥammād's main teachers.)) The Imam tells him to demonstrate and so Ḥammād faces the

qiblah and begins his worship. After he is finished the Imam laments, “O Ḥammād! you do not perform *ṣalāh* properly. How disgraceful it is for a man that he may reach the age of sixty or seventy and he cannot perform a single *ṣalāh* completely with all its guidelines!”((The Imam may have chosen this phrasing to make his statement more general and avoid limiting it to Ḥammād. Ḥammād lived to be a little bit over ninety years old and died in about the year 209 AH. Imam al-Ṣādiq (‘a) was martyred in about the year 148 AH, so Ḥammād would have been somewhere around his early thirties or younger during this incident.)) Ḥammād was embarrassed and so the Imam stood and demonstrated how to perform *ṣalāh* properly and Ḥammād describes for us the *ṣalāh* of the Imam with great detail. Now, when the Imam gets to the first *julūs*, Ḥammād describes:

“Then he raised he raised his head from prostration and when he was sitting upright he said, “*Allāh akbar*.” He sat on his left side and placed the top of his right foot on the sole of his left foot.”

In another report, Imam al-Bāqir (‘a) instructs Zurārah, one of his most intimate students:

“When you sit for *tashahhud*, place your knees on the ground and leave a little bit of space between them. Let the top of your right foot be on your left foot and your posterior on the ground and the ends of your right toes be on the ground.”

It is reported that a man asked Amīr al-Mu’minīn (‘a) about the position of raising the right foot and lowering the left foot underneath it. The Imam explained that its esoteric explanation is a supplication, “O Allah, make falsehood perish and establish the truth!”

You may have seen this sitting position before from Sunni Muslims. Most of the Sunni legal schools recommend a variant of *tawarruk*((The difference is that Sunni Muslims do not rest their right foot on the sole of their left foot. Rather, they stand their right foot up with their toes pointing towards the *qiblah*)) in at least some *julūses*((The Mālikī school recommends *tawarruk* – sometimes referred to as *al-ifḍā’* – in all *julūses*. The Shāfi‘ī school recommends *tawarruk* in

the final *tashahhud* of all prayers, while the Hanbalī school recommends *tawarruk* in the final *tashahhud* of prayers that are three and four *raka'āt*. According to these last two schools, all other *julūses* should be in the position of *iftirāsh*.) However, you are also likely to see a different sitting position among them, *jilsah al-iftirāsh*, ((The Ḥanafī school recommends all *julūses* for men be *iftirāsh*, while for women *tawarruk* is recommended.)) where they sit on their left foot rather than on their left thigh. ((You can see an image of the Sunni variant of *tawarruk* and of *iftirāsh* here.))

Jilsah al-Tawarruk is recommended in the *sunnah* for men. There is a unique sitting position for women that is unlike that for men. In a *ḥadīth* from Imam al-Bāqir (‘a), he describes how she should sit:

“When she sits, she puts her thighs together and raises her knees from the ground.”

So, this would resemble more of what we might call squatting. Shaykh Ḥasan Najafī in his celebrated forty volume commentary of *Sharā’i‘ al-Islām, Jawāhir al-Kalām*, details this sitting posture. He says:

“As for women, *tawarruk* is not recommended for them, as per what more than one *faqīh* has noted. In fact, what is well-known from the *fatāwā* – so much so that consensus is claimed in *al-Ghunya* ((*Ghunya al-Nuzū‘ilā ‘Ilmay al-Uṣūl wa al-Furū‘* is a multidiscipline work covering theology (*kalām*), legal theory (*uṣūl al-fiqh*), and statute law (*furū‘ al-fiqh*) by the jurist Sayyid Ḥamzah b. ‘Alī b. Zuhrah al-Ḥalabī (511 – 585 AH).))—is that their *julūs* is on the posterior while putting their thighs together, raising her knees and legs, and putting both of her feet on the ground.”

Now that we know the *mustaḥabb* sitting postures for both men and women, you may say that very few people sit like this. Most practicing Shi‘a, male and female, usually sit on top of both their legs and feet, placing one foot over the other. Although sitting like this is valid, it is not *mustaḥabb*. In the same report where Imam al-Bāqir (‘a) is teaching Zurārah how to sit for *tashahhud*, he cautions him:

“Beware of sitting on your feet, as you will be in pain because of that. You will not be sitting on the ground. You will be sitting on yourself, thus not be patient for *tashahhud* and *du‘ā’*.”

Many people are unable to stand for *ṣalāh*, whether for part of it or all of it, so they perform it seated. Others capable of standing may elect to perform their *nāfilah* seated. If you do pray seated, then it is recommended, according to Sayyid Sīstānī’s commentary on *al-‘Urwah al-Wuthqā* ((The author of *al-‘Urwah al-Wuthqā*, Sayyid Kāẓim Yazdī, says it is recommended to sit with your knees up in front of you, a sitting position called *qurfuṣā’*. However, Sayyid Sīstānī states that what has come in ḥadīth is *tarabbu’* and that it is farfetched that the report intended *qurfuṣā’*.) to sit cross-legged, called *jilsah al-tarabbu’*, during the *qirā’ah* and to fold your legs underneath yourself for *rukū’*. Shaykh Ṣadūq reports a ḥadīth of Imam al-Ṣādiq saying:

“When my father would pray sitting, he would sit cross-legged, and when he did *rukū’*, he would fold his legs underneath [himself].”

The Imams (‘a) gave importance to these recommended practices, or *sunan*, so we should strive to incorporate them into our worship as much as is possible. Ḥammād was a major scholar and transmitter of ḥadīth. It is unlikely that when he demonstrated *ṣalāh* for the Imam, he was conducting it in a way that was invalid. Yet the Imam admonishes him quite strongly. It is also reported that someone came to Imam al-Ṣādiq (‘a), telling him that he prays in Masjid al-Ḥarām and, due to moisture on the ground, sits on his left foot. The Imam says to him:

“Sit on your posterior, even if you are in mud.”

These recommendations are not meant to put anyone in any sort of *ḥaraj* (undue difficulty). If one is physically incapable to sit in these postures, it causes them pain, or even if they are in a rush, then it is perfectly fine to sit in some other way. These *sunan* have not been made obligatory, easing the burden of believers.

To Summarize:

1. There are normally three instances of sitting in prayer: Between prostrations, before rising for the next *rak'ah*, and during *tashahhud*.
2. There is no obligatory way to sit, as long as you are sitting, it is considered valid.
3. It is recommended for men to sit in *tawarruk* and for women to squat with their knees together and raised.
4. It is not recommended to sit on your feet.
5. It is recommended to sit cross-legged during *qirā'ah* and to fold your legs under during *rukū'* if you are performing *ṣalāh* seated.