

Useful Tips

Getting Comfortable in Meditation

One of the challenges we have to overcome in the beginning stages of meditation is the discomfort of sitting cross-legged on the floor. This is a very common phenomenon, especially in the West where we are accustomed to sitting mostly in chairs. But chairs (as well as beds, etc.) are too relaxing for meditation, more often than not leading to sleep soon after closing our eyes. If the body feels too "loose" in its posture, the mind will also feel the same, causing lack of concentration as well as drowsiness. So we really have to get used to sitting cross-legged on the floor. How do we do that?

First of all, find a place where you feel comfortable and where you won't be disturbed – a quiet room, a corner of your bedroom, a peaceful spot in the garden. Sit on a blanket or mat, and keep it only for your meditation – don't use it for anything else. You can use a shawl or another blanket to cover yourself if you feel cold.

The main areas of discomfort in the beginning are the back and the legs.

Keep the back straight. This is important, not only to avoid back pain but also to concentrate the mind. We should be in a position where we feel alert and relaxed at the same time, like a cat stalking its prey. Not too relaxed, not too tense – poised. This will come with time and practice, but meanwhile here are some hints to allay the initial discomfort.

Make a "seat" by placing some folded blankets or cushions under your mat so your backside is higher than the ground. Make it as high as you like to get reasonably comfortable. That will help keep your back straight, while at the same time taking the pressure off your legs. Avoid resting your back against the wall – you will get too relaxed to concentrate. The back should be as close to a straight line as possible, right from the base of the spine all the way up to the crown of the head. Put your finger on the highest point of your head and adjust your posture while mentally picturing a straight line

down the spine. Keeping your back straight will not only prevent your muscles from straining and getting sore – it will also enhance your spiritual experience by keeping the energy channels in the spinal column open.

Now, the legs. Start off cross-legged. Lotus posture – or half-lotus – is better for concentration, but you can progress to it later when you get more flexible. The flexibility you need is in the hips, but you will feel the pressure mostly in the knees, and to some extent the ankles. The range of movement in the hip joints will come with time – each time you sit down to meditate will increase the flexibility a bit more. So that's automatic. What we have to do in the meantime is deal with the discomfort in the knees and ankles.

Firstly, you can warm the joints up with exercises like the Butterfly. Hold your feet together with your hands and gently rock your knees up and down. A'sanas (yoga postures) such as Yogamudra' are also helpful.

Next, sitting on a raised platform of blankets or cushions as explained before will lessen the discomfort in your ankles and knees by taking the weight off them. Reduce the height of the blankets as you get more accustomed and the pain in your joints decreases.

Next, to really help your flexibility and comfort, as well as your ability to concentrate: become vegetarian. Uric acid and other toxins from meat are deposited in the joints, making them stiff and ultimately causing diseases such as gout and arthritis. You will soon find that your flexibility will improve dramatically after becoming vegetarian.

Last but not least, be determined to succeed. Take the firm resolve that you will continue practicing and that nothing will stand in your way. That determination combined with your continued practice will ensure that these initial obstacles are quickly overcome, and very soon you will realize that you are accomplishing something very deep and profound in your life!

Becoming Vegetarian

There are a number of reasons why – despite good intentions – you may not be able to give up eating meat. Let's go through them one by one:

If meat is the only available food source, but this only really applies in places of extreme climate, such as very cold places like the Arctic regions, or very hot and desert-like areas. So, for example, the Inuit people of the Arctic may have to eat meat to survive, but for the majority of us the non-availability of vegetarian food is not an issue.

You may have the impression that by not eating meat they would be lacking in protein, or essential vitamins and minerals. Nutritionally speaking, of course, it's increasingly well known these days that this just isn't so. You can get more than enough protein and other essential nutrients by eating a balanced vegetarian diet of fruits, vegetables, grains, legumes, dairy products, nuts and seeds. A vegan diet (without dairy products) is also adequate, as long as you eat enough protein-rich wholegrains, legumes, nuts and seeds. In any case, your body will "tell" you what you need to eat. If you have a particular craving for any type of food, it may mean that you need the nutrients that it supplies – so trust the natural signals your body gives you .

Due to your personal preference, you may like the taste or texture of meat, and/or think vegetarian food is bland or unsubstantial in comparison. If you do feel like this but you still want to go vegetarian, try using soy meat-substitutes like soy chunks, as well as other soy and gluten products that look and taste like meat. For example, mock chicken, duck, pork, etc. In some places they even make it look like meat as well, with drumsticks of "chicken" (pseudo-chicken, that is) for example! Learn vegetarian recipes that actually taste good. There are plenty of ways of cooking vegetarian food in a tasty way. For example, spaghetti bolognese cooked with soy mince instead of real mince is practically indistinguishable from the original. The yogic system of food excludes onion and garlic (because of their dulling effect on the mind), but you can make up for their taste by using a powder called hing (*asafetida*), which is made from a root found in India. Just fry it in a bit of cooking oil before throwing in the vegetables.

If you fry it with finely chopped cabbage it gives an extra onion-like taste. Of course there are other herbs and spices such as turmeric, ginger, chili, etc, that you can use in an endless number of creative ways to spice up your meals.

Whether it's food or anything else, the company you keep is also very important. If someone keeps the company of thieves that person will become a thief. It's true! So when you want to go vegetarian, it's important that you eat with other vegetarians. It helps! Apart from being able to share recipes and other helpful information, it will keep you inspired to stick to the vegetarian diet and make it more convenient for you to do so. For example, if you live with other vegetarians, you can pool your resources and share the shopping and cooking. So the company you keep is very important.

If you've been eating meat for a long time, your digestive system will most probably have become clogged up with all the toxins and other particles of partially digested meat. So it's a good idea to clean your system before you go vegetarian. That will increase the efficiency of the digestive process, and allow you to absorb all the essential nutrients and vital energy of your food. It also means you'll feel satisfied on less, without the bloated feeling and indigestion of eating meat. Of course there are many other health benefits to eating vegetarian food, but we won't go into all of them now. Suffice it to say that a vegetarian diet is better for the mind, body, animals, and the environment!

There are various ways of cleaning your digestive system, including going on a fruit and/or lemon-water fast, but perhaps the best way is to get into the habit of doing a regular one-day fast every two weeks. That will give your organs a well-earned rest as well as cleaning and detoxifying your whole system. Regarding children, it's especially important that children are not introduced to meat, at least before the age of five. Up to this age the best food for them is milk, fruits and roots. After five you can introduce sugar, starch and fatty substances into their diet. The emphasis should be on alkaline food (fruits, lightly cooked vegetables, milk, etc) as opposed to acidic, starchy, processed, sugary foods.