

Question 30: I cannot meditate well. What can I do to improve my ability to meditate?.

Answer: Ability to meditate depends on several factors. One is preparation. Meditation should be done in a clean, pure environment, a place which is not only physically clean, free of noise, disturbance, stale odors, and clutter, but also spiritually clean – where no chaotic or busy activities such as working, fighting or intoxication occur. You should designate a special place to sit for meditation, where only meditation or dharmic activity is done. You may wish to burn incense and light a candle or oil lamp to further purify the area. Preparation for meditation also includes efforts to decrease disturbances in the mind by avoiding circumstances that provoke negative thoughts and instead engage in activities that encourage dharmic thoughts.

Meditation is best done early in the morning, before the stresses of the day arise, and after a shower, when the body is clean and refreshed, wearing clean, loose fitting clothes. It is helpful to do some yoga first, to relax and energize the body, breathing slowly and deeply, allowing your energy to flow freely throughout the body. Or you may do a walking meditation, simply focusing on each individual sensation of walking as it occurs, without any analysis.

Then, sit in a proper meditation position, with a straight back and relaxed shoulders, and one hand on the other palm with thumbs touching. If you have any stress at all, it is good to do a progressive relaxation of the body, by relaxing one area at a time, from the head to the toes (for example, slowly think: “relax (or breathe out any tension in) the forehead, eyes, mouth, jaw, face, neck, shoulders, arms and hands, chest, stomach, hips and thighs ....”

You should do some chanting, either aloud or silently, of a mantra or gātha (verse), which establishes rhythmic, soothing vibrations and elevating thoughts of the meaning of the mantra or gātha. Or you may say a prayer, such as a wish for all beings to be peaceful and happy.

It may be helpful to do a visualization, such as creating in your mind a peaceful place in nature, or a candle flame.

With this preparation, you can more easily do a meditation on awareness of breathing, or on mindfulness of the body. Concentration must be balanced with mindfulness, where the mind is not *forced* to focus on the meditation object, but is not lazily floating on streams of thought.

Meditation is extremely important on the Buddhist path, as it is the best way to control the mind in order to purify it. As the Buddha says, without meditation, wisdom wanes. Because it is so important, it should not be given up, but should be slowly developed so that you don't get discouraged. If you spend just a few moments every day attempting to meditate, you discipline yourself to prepare to meditate so that at least in the future, you will be able to meditate. If you don't start now, you may pass through this life without having made the effort and you will have to start from zero in the next life.