

Possible Physical Problems Met with in Meditation.

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When we sit we take refuge in the Three Treasures. It is easy to see that we are taking refuge in our own Buddha nature (not that this is separate from everyone else's) but we should also remember that we take refuge in the Dharma and in the Sangha. We should be aware, too, that we need to find the middle way, the path between the opposites.

As far as the physical side of meditation is concerned, the Sangha can help us make sure that we have as correct a posture as our body allows. At the outset we should ask a priest to check the way we are sitting. If, later, problems arise we should make sure that these are not caused by our sitting improperly, and it is always good to check with a priest when any apparent difficulty arises.

We take refuge in the Dharma during meditation by listening to all the teaching that comes to us, and this includes through our body. As we begin to sit up straight in the presence of the Buddhas and Ancestors our body often complains that we are pushing it into unaccustomed shapes. Here we need to find the line between giving in too easily to discomfort and causing ourselves unnecessary pain. As a general rule we should sit still with the ache until we really have to move and then change to a comfortable position with as little fuss as possible. If, however, we find the pain persists we should seek advice from a priest or, if appropriate, a doctor.

There is no need to sit cross-legged, which usually results in aching knees and ankles if we are not used to it, but, if we do, it is essential that we alternate the position of our legs each time we sit to avoid permanent damage to the spine or hips. Generally our body will warn us if we are causing it lasting harm but this is not always the case. It is good to examine in detail why we are sitting cross-legged if that is what we choose to do.

Discomfort may also come from being too tense. This can often result in pains in the back or shoulders. Here again we need to find the balance between holding ourselves stiffly erect and sagging. Once we have straightened our backs we should relax our body but make sure our mind is still alert. The tenseness or laxity of our thumbs in the meditation mudra during meditation is a good indication of whether we are too tense or too relaxed.

If we find that our legs have gone to sleep during the meditation period, we have probably been cutting off the circulation by sitting too far back on our seat or pressing one leg on top of the other. A small cushion on the chair can raise the bottom sufficiently to prevent this. Legs that have fallen asleep buckle under the weight of standing, so to prevent winding up on the floor, always make sure that the circulation to the legs is normal *before* trying to stand. Sometimes they can fall asleep without our being aware of it.

In the beginning we may be distracted by certain physical effects. It can take a little practice to keep the eyes focussed on the wall in front of us without getting caught by patterns or shadows, or going off into a slightly trance-like unfocused state. At times the wall may appear closer or further away than we know it is. As soon as we are aware of any of these we simply need to bring our mind back to just sitting, perhaps blink once or twice, and focus our eyes on the wall without examining it in detail. If we usually wear

glasses to focus our eyes at that distance we should wear them for meditation and our eyes should be allowed to blink in the usual way; otherwise we may find they begin to water.

Drowsiness is something that can arise because we are tired or for reasons that are not so easy to understand. Sitting in a well-ventilated room that is not too hot and trying to find time for our meditation before the end of the day can help here. If we find that we are falling asleep for no apparent reason we probably need to experiment to find what works for us. Some people find that putting their hands in *gasshá* until the drowsiness passes helps. For others a repeated act of will may be called for (perhaps asking the help of *ÄchalanÄtha*,¹ for we are never sitting alone). We may need to remind ourselves of why we have come to our sitting place and make sure our mind is bright and positive.

Meditation can only be learnt by doing it and it is a continuing process. Just as we sit and let the thoughts come and go, so can we let the physical distractions come and go: if we are sitting properly, our Buddha nature will draw our attention to those we should pay heed to, and that is when to take refuge in the Three Treasures.

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Note.

1. *Achalanatha*, the Unmoving Lord (J: *Fudo-myo-o*), is one of the Guardians of the Gateways to training. He represents one aspect of the Eternal—the will to train, to sit still and be unmoved by anything within or outside of ourselves. We can call on the help of this aspect of the Eternal and find that place within each of us that is immovable, imperturbable, indestructible.