

## *Sit with It*

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Ajaan Lee compares meditation to looking after a small child. As you get to know the child, you begin to read its cries, so that you can figure out whether it's hungry, needs to be changed, needs to be picked up and carried around, or should be given some toys. In other words, when the mind is not settling down, you try to figure out what's wrong, and as you get to know it, you learn to read what it needs. You'll realize that there are times when you have to change the breathing and other times when you have to change the posture or change the place you're focused. Sometimes you have to drop the breath and do some contemplations: contemplating goodwill, contemplating death.

Some people might say, "Why contemplate death?" Well, it reminds you that you don't have much time. You don't have all the time in the world to develop the mind, so when the mind is getting lazy, it's good to think about the fact that death could come at any time. Would you like to have it come after a day when you've been lazy? Well, no. When you start getting discouraged, you can think about the different verses in the Theragatha and Therigatha about the monks and the nuns who got really discouraged in their practice but were able to turn themselves around. Some of them even got suicidal, went berserk, but then they were able to turn themselves around. You're not suicidal. You're not berserk. If there's hope for them, there's hope for you.

In other words, either you try to deal with problems coming from the body or deal with problems coming from the mind. Over time, you begin to read what the problem is and figure out the solution.

But then there are times when, as with any child, you don't know what's going on. The child is too small to tell you what the problem is or too embarrassed, if it's old enough to speak, or for some reason doesn't know what the problem is itself. You check all the child-rearing manuals. They don't give you any suggestions. You ask other parents. They can't give you any other suggestions. So at times like that, you have to learn how to sit with the child and develop some patience.

Every parent has learned this. Parenting requires more patience than anything else. You're called on at weird hours of the day, weird hours of the night, to take care of a problem, and sometimes the problem is not really clear as to what exactly it is, so you have to sit with the child, talk to the child, talk to yourself in hopes that at some point things will become clear. And it's the same with the mind.

Another quote from Ajaan Lee: He says that the ways of the mind are more than can be put in any book. Your mind is your mind. There are similarities among our minds, which is why we're able to have instructions and learn from instructions, but we each have our own particularities—the details of what's wrong with the mind—and those we have to figure out on our own. They're not going to show themselves right away, so it's important that you learn the value of patience, the value of endurance, the stick-to-it kind of quality that you need.

You may say, "Well, I didn't sign on for this when I signed on to meditate," but what you signed on for and what the reality of the mind is are two very different things. We sign on for the idea that it's going to be comfortable and relaxing: We learn to release a lot of the stress. Things become clear inside. So when they don't go as we want, we think, "Well, this is no good," and we drop it. That's like taking your child and throwing it away when you're not really clear as to what the child's problem is. You've got to be responsible for the child, even when it's ornery. You've got to be responsible for your mind. You've got to think in those terms.

Remind yourself that a session of meditation is not necessarily measured by how good the concentration is. There are other ways of measuring it. One of them is how much patience you have. And see patience as a positive value, because if you're not willing to sit with the mind and with the body when they're bad, there's a lot you're not going to learn—and we *are* here to learn. So when things are difficult and hard to figure out, this is when you pull out the patience card. Say, "Okay, we're going to learn some patience here."

It's not always the case that you can figure out what's wrong with the body and use the breath to cure it. There are some pains in the body, some feelings of discomfort that have nothing to do with the breath at all. And if you think a boring meditation or a meditation that doesn't go the way you want it to is difficult, think about what it's going to be like when you're about to die. The body at that point won't do what you want. You'll have to depend entirely on the strength of the mind—and one of the important strengths is patience, combined with the discernment that allows you to step back and watch what's going on without feeling that you have to be *in* what's going on in the body or in the mind—because you're going to be making a lot of decisions at that point.

This last week I was teaching a retreat, and there was a period when people were talking about the difficulties of bringing meditation into daily life, especially in their work environment. Then, after about half an hour, the discussion shifted over to the issue of death. As I commented, you think bringing meditation into work is difficult, just wait until you die. The mind has to make a lot of choices. It's

not simply we just let go of things and allow them to take their course. Choices will have to be made that will have an impact on your future, so you want to be able to make them wisely, even though the body is going to be painful or at least very uncomfortable.

We work with comfort at the beginning to make the mind more amenable to settling down, but then you have to practice how to keep it settled down even when things cannot be made amenable, because you're going to need that mental strength. A simple form of mental strength is just learning how to sit with the mind when it's being ornery, being obstreperous, when it's hard to figure out what's wrong, because the only way you're going to figure out what's wrong is if you sit with it and watch. You can think of another analogy: a hunter. The hunter goes out, knowing where the animals tend to be. Sometimes they'll come and sometimes they won't, but the hunter has to be alert and still all throughout that, in case an animal does come.

I've been reading about an explorer who studied the Inuit very carefully, and because he was part Inuit himself and he knew the language, he was able to observe not only their daily lives but also ask them about their beliefs, their fears. In fact, when asking the different shamans about their beliefs, he often got the response, "It's not that we believe. We fear." They talked about how so much in life didn't make sense. The hunter goes out. The children at home are starving. The wife is starving. And nothing comes. But that doesn't mean the hunter gives up. The hunter keeps going out, going out, going out, because you can't just give up.

You've got to see the survival of your mind as important as that, and even on days when the meditation doesn't go well, you just keep going out and doing what you know you're supposed to do. Keep quiet. Keep observant. Have your eyes and ears open in all directions. As for the parts of the mind that are not quiet, pull yourself out of them. Let them continue their discussions, but you don't have to get involved.

As for the parts of the body that you can't make comfortable, find the parts that you can. As Ajaan Lee said, if everything in the body were painful, you'd die. There's got to be some place where you get the mind to settle in so that you can practice this strength of mind, so that someday when you actually are dying and there is no place in the body where you can focus, the mind doesn't lose its bearings and doesn't forget the lessons it learned from the meditation.

So as you get to know the mind, you begin to locate the areas where you can make a difference, and you take advantage of those. If you run up against some of those periods when nothing makes a difference at all, learn how to sit with it. That, in and of itself, makes an important difference in the mind, when you don't

give in to the impulse to throw in the towel. You say to yourself, “Even though I may not be getting the peace and quiet I want, I’m still learning.” And that’s really what the meditation is all about: learning about your body, learning especially about your mind. If you want to learn about these things, you have to be able to sit with them both when they’re good and when they’re bad, when they’re cooperative and when they’re not. That’s how you come to understand your body and mind in ways you never understood them before.