



Learning to Stay, by Pema Chodron

In meditation we discover our inherent restlessness. Sometimes we get up and leave. Sometimes we sit there but our bodies wiggle and squirm and our minds go far away. This can be so uncomfortable that we feel it's impossible to stay. Yet this feeling can teach us not just about ourselves but also about what it is to be human. All of us derive security and comfort from the imaginary world of memories and fantasies and plans. We really don't want to stay with the nakedness of our present experience. It goes against the grain to stay present. These are the times when only gentleness and a sense of humor can give us the strength to settle down.

The pith instruction is, Stay...stay...just stay. Learning to stay with ourselves in meditation is like training a dog. If we train a dog by beating it, we'll end up with an obedient but very inflexible and rather terrified dog. The dog may obey when we say, "Stay!" "Come!" "Roll over!" and "Sit up!" but he will also be neurotic and confused. By contrast, training with kindness results in someone who is flexible and confident, who doesn't become upset when situations are unpredictable and insecure.

So whenever we wander off, we gently encourage ourselves to "stay" and settle down. Are we experiencing restlessness? Stay! Discursive mind? Stay! Aching knees and throbbing back? Stay!. What's for lunch? Stay! What am I doing here? Stay! I can't stand this another minute! Stay! That is how we cultivate steadfastness. [...]

When our emotions intensify, what we usually feel is fear. This fear is always lurking in our lives. In sitting meditation we practice dropping whatever story we are telling ourselves and leaning into the emotions and the fear. Thus we train in opening the fearful heart to the restlessness of our own energy. We learn to abide with the experience of our emotional distress. [...]

Coming back to the present moment takes some effort, but the effort is very light. The instruction is to "touch and go." we touch thoughts by acknowledging them as thinking and then we let them go. It's a way of relaxing our struggle, like touching a bubble with a feather. It's a nonaggressive approach to being here.

--Pema Chodron, from 'The Places That Scare You'

