Stay

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One of the basic principles of the Dhamma is that in Pali it’s “atta hy etanonato.” In English, “self” is its own mainstay. In other words, you have to learn how to depend on yourself. One of the most disconcerting things in life is looking at yourself and seeing how you can be independent. Not only with regard to other people, but also with regard to yourself. You make up your mind that you’re going to do something, and then you find yourself doing something else. You look at something and it seems obvious, and it turns out to be something totally different from what you saw. So when the Buddha says, “Self is its own mainstay,” that’s actually a goal toward which we’re trying to move. You’re learning how to make yourself more dependable. Part of this involves learning from other people, and also another part involves learning how to be more observant. So you can learn how to trust your powers of observation. That means you have to develop them. That means starting off with a good, fixed point of reference. It’s like sitting on a train in a station. You look out and you see another train next to you, and you realize that your train is moving relative to it, or else it’s moving relative to you, and you don’t know which, unless you can see a post or something else that’s firmly fixed to the ground. This is one of the things we’re doing. As we meditate, we’re giving the mind a firm post fixed to the ground so that you can see the movements of the mind. In other words, when the mind moves, it can see its own movements. But if you give it something nearby to focus on, then you begin to get a sense of when the mind is present and when it’s gone off someplace else. So we take the breath as our point of reference. Not only because it helps keep us anchored in the present moment, but as you get more and more familiar with the breath, you begin to see that it’s a mirror for the mind. When you’re feeling anxious, you breathe in a certain way. When there’s greed, when there’s lust, when there’s anger, you have different ways of breathing. And if you could learn how to read the breath and the breath, you could be able to read the breath in this way. You gain a better sense of when your mind is in a state where it can be relied on and when it can’t. In other words, if you know that you’re angry, you stop and say, “Wait a minute. As long as there’s anger taking over the mind, it can’t rely on your perceptions.” So at the very least, you try to ease the breath. Get the breath back to normal. The process of getting the breath back to normal requires that you stop and start being meticulous and observant. In other words, it gets you out of that angry state of mind, at least for a minute. Then you can look at it from a different perspective. You look at the situation from a different perspective, and you’ll see things differently. The hormones may still be racing through your blood, but at least you’ve got your point of reference. This is important because there are so many things that we need to observe, not only in the world around us, but also within the mind. If you want to reflect on the mind, what’s going on in the mind, you need to have a discipline. You need to have a point of departure. Otherwise, you’re just going to wallow around aimlessly. And you may come up with some interesting insights, but then the question is, one, are they really genuine? And two, even if they are genuine, are they going to go to the heart? Is the mind going to be receptive to take that insight and really work with it, to develop it, to internalize it? Again, this is where the breath comes in handy as your foundation, as your point of discipline. Because as long as the breath is normal, as Ajaan Lee says, when you’ve got a mirror, you want to make sure the mirror is flat. It’s not wavy. When the mirror is flat, you can look in the mirror and see yourself for what you actually are. If it’s a funhouse mirror, then you get all sorts of weird, warped perceptions. So make the breath as flat and smooth and easy, as comfortable throughout the body as you can. That helps you see what’s going on in the mind more clearly, especially when you can get to the point where the breath, the in-and-out breath, actually seems to stop and you’re just left with this still but vibrant energy field in the body. When you’ve been able to get the breath to that point, not only can you see things more clearly, but the mind is more receptive. It’s more apt to absorb what it sees. Because a lot of times the important insights in life are not the ones that you want to hear. In fact, this is one of the reasons why they’re so hard to attain. It’s because the mind resists them. But if you put the mind in a better mood, basically, it’s like getting someone well-fed, well-rested, so you can break some unfortunate news to them. They’ll be in a better position to take it in. Because what are you going to see when you really see the patterns of the mind? You’re going to see how bullheaded you’ve been, how ignorant you’ve been. Sometimes you’re going to see how blind you’ve been. Sometimes you’re going to see how stupid you’ve been. These are things we don’t like to see, but they’re necessary if we’re going to make changes in our lives. So staying with the breath, getting it normal, at ease, filling the body so that your awareness can fill the body as well. You eliminate blind spots and you get the mind basically softened up so it’s in a better position to absorb the insights that are going to come. Now, for this to work, it requires that you learn to spend a lot of time with the breath. This is why we practice again and again and again with the breath, so that you’re not only more aware of the subtleties in the breath, but you learn how to trust the breath more. This is an important element of the meditation. This is what you can hold on to. This is your refuge. As you learn through experience that what you see in the mind while the breath is still, while the breath is normal, and the mind is firmly with the breath, actually provides you with insights that you can use. You put them into practice and you see that you get results. You’re also in a better position to judge those results. As you’re meditating, resist any temptation, any urge to go away from the breath. One of the best ways to do that is to make the breath an inviting place to be, an interesting place to be. There’s breath energy in the body. There are many levels to it. There’s the in-and-out breath. Then there’s the more subtle breath energies that flow with the blood. They go along the nervous system. Even spots in the body where the breath energy seems totally still. You can think of these as different levels of subtlety in the breath. These different levels of the breath interpenetrate one another, and it’s a matter of tuning in. You find that different ways of breathing have different effects. It can help ease pains, a sense of blockage in the body in different spots. Or focusing on different levels of subtlety in the breath can make the body more inviting, make it a more comfortable place to stay, easier to stay in the present moment because you like being there. And you’ve got to learn how to trust the breath, not only in terms of obvious distractions like thoughts of the past or thoughts of the future, but things that come up in the meditation that are sometimes a result of the concentration—states of pleasure, states of rapture. These can arise. Visions can arise. And you take these as signs, but you don’t want to move into them. In the same way that when you’re driving down a road, you see a sign up ahead. You don’t go up and drive on the sign. You stay on the road. Remind yourself, “The breath here is the road. This is the path.” A vision may come up, and that may be a sign that the mind is beginning to settle down. Take it just as that, a sign that the mind is settling down, not a sign of something else, more portentous or that has some inherent meaning. Just because something comes up in the quiet mind doesn’t mean that it’s necessarily true or reliable. Because even the insights that come up in the meditation, you’ve got to double-check them. You’ve got to put them into practice. This is how Ajahn Munn was able to keep himself from wandering astray. A lot of his practice lay in learning how to teach himself how to monitor his practice. It involved just this. He was a meditator who tended to have lots of visions. The question was, “What do they mean? How are they useful?” That was the question. How are they useful? How can you get the use out of the meditation without getting misled by it? In each case, it was a question of learning, “Is there a Dharma lesson here?” Sometimes the lesson lay in watching how a vision formed and how it fell apart. Or, if there seemed to be a particular lesson in terms of the content of the vision, he wouldn’t necessarily believe in it. He’d put it to the test. If you actually take this as an assumption and put it to use in your life, what results do you get? Even though the insights that come up in the still mind tend to be more reliable than the insights that come up when your mind is rushing around, just because they arise, doesn’t mean that you can fully depend on them until you’ve put them to the test. This is another way in which you have to learn how to depend on yourself and make yourself more reliable. As for states of ease and rapture, again, don’t let them pull you away from the breath. They’re signs. You learn how to breathe in such a way that you can maintain them, because they are an important part of the practice. As Ajahn Fu said, they’re the lubricant that keeps the practice going. Otherwise, it dries up, seizes up, and you lose the desire to practice, because there’s no fun in it. There’s no enjoyment. So the ease, the rapture, give the chance both for the body to settle down, the “be,” and its ease, and for the mind to gain a sense of ease and rapture. But you don’t have to jump into the ease and rapture in order to get full benefit from it. Stay with the cause, which is the mind focused on the breath, with a sense of steadiness, a sense of finesse. The ease and rapture will do their work. You don’t have to squeeze them or hug them or anything to make them do more work than they can. The point will come where they’ve done their work, there’s enough of them, and then the mind can move to a more subtle level. But again, stay with the breath. So this is the discipline of the meditation. A lot of times we don’t like the word “discipline.” But it’s an important element in learning how to see, to see more consistently, to see more reliably. Oftentimes we think one of the reasons we can’t see the truth in our lives is that the truth is hidden. We try to look into deeper and deeper layers, but actually what happens is we tend to get more and more into abstraction and further and further away from that. That’s what’s actually happening. There are a lot of studies that show that many times the details that we need to see in other people’s behavior, that tell us what’s going on in their minds, are right there. They’re written all over their faces. But we don’t see them. We’re looking at something else. We’re looking for something else. We’re trying to second-guess what’s going on behind the face. We don’t look right at the face itself to see the micro-expressions that flit across the face. Some people instinctively notice them. Other people don’t seem to. What’s interesting is you can be taught how to see these things. It takes time. It takes concentration. It takes dedication. It takes the willingness to make some mistakes and learn from them. But after a while, you begin to notice them as well. The same goes for the mind. The mind shows its defilements. It shows its ignorance and all of its other problems pretty much on the surface. But we’re trying to look past the surface all the time, and so we don’t see it. When you’re with the breath, you don’t see it. You’re right there where the mind and the body meet. You’re right at the surface of the mind, looking at its movements as they’re happening. In this way, you see the details of its behavior. Where do you think the Buddha learned to panic-core rising and all those other subtle teachings? He was looking right at the surface movements of the mind. They’re all here, but we’re too busy looking past them. So if you learn how to look more consistently here at the present moment, this is the discipline of the meditation, so that you’re not constantly second-guessing things and trying to theorize about what’s going on. You watch the movements of the mind and you’ll see them. You see what causes suffering and what doesn’t cause suffering. It’s all right here. But you need the discipline to keep yourself at this point of reference. This is where everything shows itself and where everything can be tested. So when you want to reflect on what’s going on in your life, the areas where you find that you haven’t been able to depend on yourself and you’d like to depend both on your powers of observation and depend on your intentions more, this is the point. It’s the point from which it all departs, from which it all takes its stance. So get used to staying here consistently, again and again and again, as continuously as possible. The more continuous your awareness, the more you see.

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