NR Absorbed in the Body

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Ask yourself what kind of breathing would feel good right now. You can breathe any way you like. And then with each breath, keep asking that question. Stay with the area in the middle of the chest, what kind of breathing would feel good there. And after the chest has been soothed or energized or whatever you’d like to have it do, move down to the abdomen. From there, down to the hips, the legs, the shoulders, the arms. Keep making a survey, circling it. Like a dog lying down to sleep. Circles around, scratches here, scratches there, in case there’s a rock or a root or something that’s getting in the way. Really get into the breathing. Because if your mind has been wandering around, it needs something to really attract it. Attract its attention here in the present moment. Otherwise, it’s going to keep wandering. You’ve got all that unfinished business. Life as a whole is unfinished business. So you need something to pull yourself away from that, and allow the unfinished business to stay unfinished. Right now, your responsibility is to give the mind a place to stay. And settle down and gain some refreshment, gain some energy, gain some strength. Which means there’s no need to think about anything else. If there are issues that have to be thought about, they can wait for later. Because if the mind has no sense of when to stop and look after itself, it just gets strung out. In John Lee’s images of a knife that you need to use to cut things, you just keep using it, hacking, hacking, hacking away at things. After a while, the knife gets dull, and it gets harder and harder to cut through things. There comes a time when you have to stop and sharpen the knife. So that when the time comes that you really have to use it and pull it out, and there it is. Cut right through things with one blow. So even though it may seem like we’re being irresponsible here, putting aside all our issues of the day, issues of the week, issues of the year, issues of our life, actually we’re not. We simply have a sense of time and place. Of when the mind needs to be used for other things and when it needs to take care of itself. This is an important quality in the practice, a sense of time and place. This morning we’re talking about the instructions for right speech. Is the issue true? Is it beneficial? Is this the right time and place to be talking about it? The same issues apply to your thoughts. This thought that’s coming up, is it true? Is it beneficial? Is it the right time and place to think it? Although when you’re meditating, that last question should come first. Any thought that’s about the breath, related to keeping the mind here, keeping it settled or allowing it to settle down even more, that’s the only kind of thought you want to be responsible for. As for any other thought that comes up, you don’t even have to think about whether it’s true or beneficial. This is not the time or place for it. So you don’t even have to investigate it to see what it is, to see where it goes. You don’t have to tie it up neatly and put it on the shelf. Just let it remain. Frayed edges. Unfinished business. A thought stopped in mid-sentence. The thoughts you want to pursue are the ones that relate to how the breathing feels right now and how you can get more into settling down. Thoughts related to the breath, thoughts related to the body right here, right now. That’s all you really need at the moment. For instance, you can ask yourself, to what extent do you want to manipulate the breath, experiment with it, and to what extent do you just want to let it come in and out on its own? Because you find there are too many sides to the meditation. There’s the more active side and the more passive side, and they have their time and place as well. I was reading this morning the homework for a Buddhist studies group. Part of the homework was, for one week, to take a more active role in focusing on your breath, and then the next week you would take a more passive role. That’s way too artificial, because what you want to learn is, when is the active role useful and when is the passive role useful? That’s something you have to shift, even in the course of a single meditation session. You may find that by being more active with the breath you’re just screwing things up, and then it’s time to stop and just let the breath do its own thing. Get out of the way as much as you can. Allow it to do the breathing. You can even tell yourself, “If the body wants to breathe, it can breathe on its own. I’m not going to do any breathing.” After a second or two, you’ll find the body will kick in. All you have to do is watch it. Then, after a while, you begin to sense that it would feel a little bit better if you did this, a little bit better if you did that. Look after the breathing in the small of your back, down at the base of your spine, in areas that tend to get neglected or ignored, in your little fingers, in your little toes. Then you can start getting more involved in the breathing process. This issue of having a sense of the right time and the right place to do things is one of the most important skills you’re going to need to develop as a meditator. There’s a time to think and a time not to think. There’s a time to be active and there’s a time to be more receptive. This is one of the ways we develop our discernment in the practice. We learn not to have too narrow or one-sided an idea of what’s the right way to do things, or to be too attached to the idea that one practice is more advanced than another. For example, thinking that after all, the jhanas in the first jhana are the ones where you do your directed thought and your evaluation, but then in the second jhana you stop it. So, of course, everybody wants to go on to the more advanced stage, so you move on to the next stage, or try at least. But it may not be what you need at that particular time. So you have to have more of an open mind in developing your discernment as to what’s needed right now. Sometimes you need to do a lot of directed thought and evaluation as we’re blocking out the mind’s tendency to be thinking about something else. If you stop your directed thought and evaluation immediately, you find your mind going back to issues of the morning, issues of this afternoon. So you actively have to block those things out. It’s like the old days when they used to jam the frequencies for Radio Free Europe. If the mind is going to think, have it think about the breath, and keep up that thinking as long as you need to block out your other thoughts. Then after a while, when there’s a nice sense of ease, a sense of fullness in the body, you’re beginning to settle in, and you get more into the breath. It’s as if you’re on the outside watching the breath, or you’re in the back of the body watching the breath, in the front of the body, or wherever you think you are. There’s more a sense that you’re seeping into the breath, your awareness seeps into the breath, the breath is seeping into your awareness. And the oneness of your meditation changes from simply having a single object to being actually one with the object. That’s when you can start putting your directed thought and evaluation aside. And see how long you can maintain that state. That’s what it comes down to, is learning how to read the needs of the body, read the needs of the mind right now. And notice which direction the mind seems to be headed. It’s getting dull. It’s getting blurry. Then you need to use some more precise thinking, precise questioning. Or if it wants to think and wants to question, but it’s starting to leave its object, think about the breath. Question the breath. That way, the thinking and the questioning actually become part of your concentration. In John Lee’s images of spinning around a post, you hold your hand on the post and you spin around and you don’t get dizzy. If you let go of the post and try to spin around, you get dizzy and fall down. But as long as you’re holding firmly onto the post, you’re okay. The spinning is the thinking. The holding onto the post is making sure that your thinking stays with the breath. Because that’s what you need right now, something you can really get into, so you can get away of those voices that try to pull you away and say, “But you’ve got to think about this, you’ve got to worry about that, there’s this thing you’ve left unfinished, and that duty needs to be done.” It’s strange how many times we have our own sense of actual obligation not to concentrate. So you’ve got to fight that false sense of obligation. You need to look after the mind. This has got to be your primary, your top priority, your primary focus, the state of your mind. You need to keep your mind in good shape, even though the world can be falling apart around you, the body can be falling apart, the pain is here, the pain is there. The Buddha never said that our happiness has to depend on everything going just right. All it has to depend on is getting the mind focused, aware, discerning, so that it doesn’t create suffering for itself out of that. It’s the imperfections of the world outside. If you try to straighten out the world before you can sit down and meditate, it’s like throwing crabs in a basket. You throw in one crab, and then you look for the second crab, and in the meantime the first crab’s crawled out. Or that old game of whack-a-mole, whack-a-mole. You hit one mole out, and another one’s popped up out of another hole. You hit the other one out, and another one’s popped out of another hole. You never get to put down the hammer. You say, “Okay, what does it matter if the moles are poking their heads out of the holes?” You need to rest. You need to get a sense of what’s going on. You need to get a sense of what’s really important in life, which is not the moles outside, but it’s the little moles inside your mind. They’re eating away at your concentration, eating away at your mindfulness. So allow the breath to fill your awareness. If you’re using a meditation word like “Buddho,” think of every cell in your body saying, “Bud,” breath, toe of the ant, filling every nook and cranny of your awareness, every nook and cranny of your body. Breath energy saturating every little cell in the body, even the ones in the spaces between your fingers and the spaces between your toes, in between your eyes, behind your eyes. Everything. That’s what you need right now. So pay attention to what’s needed right now, what’s appropriate right now. Be confident that if you take care of right now, that’s what you’re going to need. So handle the future in the best way possible, so you don’t have to go anticipating the future. Look after the right now. The more mindfulness and discernment and concentration you can develop right now, the more you’ll have to deal with whatever else comes up in the future when you actually do have to think and do have to plan. So bring mindfulness to the fore. Bring your awareness, your alertness, to the present moment, to the fore. You want to think of it as an investment. That’s exactly what it is. Sometimes we hear the idea of spiritual materialism or the gaining mind being criticized. But one of the things you learn is that you focus on the present, and it’s not just the present. You’ve got issues coming in from the past. And you know that your actions in the present moment will have an impact on the future. So try to heal whatever damage is coming in from the past, in the sense of having overworked or allowed your mind to get frazzled. Be confident that as you invest in concentration in the present moment, that’s your best investment for the future. [BLANK\_AUDIO]

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