NR Stay Right There

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When you’re meditating and there’s a Dhamma talk going on, don’t listen to the talk. Focus on your breath. Don’t send your attention out to the words or to the speaker. Your attention should be focused on how the breath feels right now. The purpose of the talk is to keep you focused right here, to catch you when you wander off and send you back into the breath. If there’s anything else in the talk that’s relevant to your practice, it’ll come right in. You don’t have to go looking out for it. And as for things that are not relevant to what you’re doing right now, just let them pass by. This is an important skill you need as you carry the meditation in your daily life. The ability to stay with the sense of the breath in the body and not get dislodged by sounds coming in from outside. Even while you’re listening to somebody, you still want to make sure that you’re inhabiting a body. You feel that you’re inside your body. You have a sense of how the breath energy in the body feels, because the breath isn’t just the air coming in and out of the lungs. It’s the whole energy field of the body, which you can feel in your hands, in your feet, in your wrists, in your ankles, your arms, your legs, your torso, your head. It’s all right here. We have a tendency to shut off this awareness as we send our attention outside to sounds that are either totally irrelevant or just sounds that you’re actually trying to listen to. You don’t want to shut off the awareness of the body. You want to keep yourself sensitive to how the body feels. Say when somebody’s talking to you and you’re beginning to feel a little bit of anger, you’ll know it more clearly if you’re inhabiting the body, inhabiting the breath, and you can do something about it in time. If you’re not aware about anger gathering or taking shape inside, then often by the time you are aware of it, it’s too late. It’s taken over. There’s tightness in your chest or tightness in your stomach, and you feel you’ve got to get it out of the system. For the most part, the ways we get it out of the system are pretty unskillful. Either you let it out in your facial expression or in your words or in your actions, or you keep it bottled up. And when it gets bottled up, it doesn’t age nicely like old wine. It gets more and more stagnant inside. It begins to ferment, and then it explodes. So the skillful way of dealing with this kind of feeling is to breathe through it. Wherever there’s tension or tightness, in the body, think of the breath energy flowing right through that part of the body as you breathe in. Say if there’s a tension in the chest, think of the breath coming in and going down the front of the body and dissolving that tension away. Or you can think of it dissolving at your hands, dissolving down through your legs, whatever seems to work. In other words, you want to inhabit your body. You don’t want the anger to inhabit the body and push you out. So it’s very important that you have this skill. You don’t have to be with the breath and pay attention to other things at the same time. In other words, you just keep your attention here, inside the body. You inhabit the body fully and have a sense of ease with the breathing. You have to know what kinds of breathing feel good. So it becomes more and more automatic. As you go through the day, this is where you are. You’re not sending your thoughts out to think about this side or the other. Even when you are thinking, you don’t have to think outside. Think inside. That way you sense what’s going on inside the body, inside the mind. You get to see the processes of thought. All too often we’re much too interested in the world outside, all these fascinating things that other people are doing and saying, but how really important are they to your life? Sometimes they may be important, but most of the time it’s just outside stuff. We send our attention outside, after all the outside stuff. As a result, we don’t get to know our own body, we don’t get to know our own mind. Yet this is where the really important decisions are being made. What you’re going to do, what you’re going to say, what you’re going to think. These are the things that shape your life. All too often we’re not there for them. Everything gets put on automatic pilot. It’s like driving a car down the road, just putting everything on cruise control. You’re not really paying attention to anything the car is doing. You’re going to smash into something for sure. You want to be there to adjust the accelerator, adjust, put your feet on the brakes, turn this way or that, whatever. Whatever is needed to deal with all the change in traffic on the road. And the same with all the decisions being made in the mind. You want to be there to make those decisions clearly. Know why you’re making the decision. Then have a good sense of what you expect out of that decision. The best way to do this is to be very clearly in the present moment, to inhabit the present moment, not let yourself get pushed out, not just run away from the present moment. So the emphasis should always be right here, right here, not over there someplace. So take this time to get more familiar with right here. What kind of breathing feels good right now? What kind of breathing feels refreshing? What does your body need right now in terms of the breath? Does it need to be energized or does it need to be calmed down? Which parts of the body feel starved of breath energy? That is deep breathing feel right now. What kind of shallow breathing feel? Experiment with these things. Get to know the territory. As you get to know the territory, you begin to see that the breath energy has a lot to offer in terms of creating a sense of well-being, even when the situation outside can be really bad. The state of the mind doesn’t have to be bad along with that situation. You can look after the state of the mind as you’re looking after the breath. In the beginning it takes a conscious effort to do this, but as you get more and more familiar with it, more and more skilled at it, it gets more and more second nature, something you do as a matter of course, without having to think much about it at all, because you’re staying right here in the body. Realizing that your true happiness doesn’t lie in what other people are doing or saying; it lies in how the mind deals with itself, how it relates to the body, how it relates to its thoughts. Then you get a greater sense of how you can be in charge, you can be in control of your own mind. You can be skilled in how you deal with the relationships in the body and the mind. When these relationships are taken care of, the issues outside are a lot easier to deal with. You learn to be kind to yourself, looking for ways to make the breath good. You learn to have some compassion for the times when it’s not feeling good. How do you keep dealing with it? How do you sit up with it to make it better? When things are going well, you try to keep them going well, even just abandon them. There are things you can’t change, where you learn to have some equanimity for them. This way, as you develop these qualities of mind inside, you find it easier to apply them outside. In other words, to have goodwill for other people, compassion for people who are suffering, feel empathy for people who are happy, and learn to be equanimous in areas where you can’t make a change. So instead, you can focus your attention and your energies on areas where you can make a change. When you learn how to develop these attitudes inside, it’s a lot easier to apply them outside as well. So, show some goodwill for your breath. Pay it some attention. Look at what it’s doing. Listen to how it feels in the body and where it might feel better. What is it telling you? Where do you need to breathe more deeply? Where should you breathe more quickly? Whatever. If you pay careful attention, you’ll learn how to read the needs of the breath energy in the body. That way, you have a good home for the mind, a place where you feel secure, a place where you can maintain your well-being no matter what’s happening outside. That’s how you keep yourself safe, safe both from your own unskillful thoughts and ideas, and safe from bad outside influences. This is what the Buddha taught us. He taught safety, refuge. One of the terms for Nirvana is harbor, a place where ships can get away from the storms of the sea and have a safe place to be. We’re trying to create that same sense of safety inside. It’s a safety that’s alert, knowledgeable. It doesn’t go running out into dangerous places. One realizes that the biggest dangers are the dangers that come from within the mind. When greed takes over, anger takes over, delusion takes over, the more you can stay here inside, the more you can take over and not be a slave to these things. So do your best to stay right here, because this is where everything important is happening.

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