Stay Right Here

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When the Buddha talks about using the breath as a framework for developing all the different establishments of mindfulness—the body in and of itself, feelings, mind states, mental qualities in and of themselves—he makes the point of saying that when you’re with the breath, these other The potential frameworks are right there in the act of staying focused on the breath. This is important. You don’t want to leave the breath to wander after feelings or to look at your mind. The breath is what gives you an anchor to stay in the present. In the act of staying focused, he says, in the attention that you pay to the breath, that active attention fabricates the feeling that comes out of being focused on the breath. So there’s the feeling right there in the act of paying attention to the breath. And of course, to stay with the breath, you need to be mindful and alert. And in the formula for establishing mindfulness, you have to subdue greed and distress with reference to the world. In other words, anything that would pull you away. You have to work to make sure that you’re not pulled in. You’re protecting your awareness of the breath. That, the Buddhist said, involves the quality of equanimity and the other mental qualities you need to protect your focus. So simply in the act of staying focused and protecting your focus, you’ve got body, you’ve got feelings, you’ve got mind states, you’ve got mental qualities. They’re all right here. The question is, which one do you want to focus on or do you want to emphasize? Because it’s hard not to focus on one. You can’t focus on one without being aware of the others. But the important thing is that you stay with the breath all the way through, even when you’re trying to pay attention to the feelings or the mind states. Because after all, how are you going to stay with the breath if you don’t notice the mind states? They’re going to pull you away. You have to have some notion of how they’re arising and what their pull is. Otherwise they’re going to pull you away without you even noticing. In fact, for most people, when they start out to meditate, that’s the case. They’re with the breath and suddenly they’re all the way someplace else, with no sense of how they got there. As if someone stuck them in a burlap bag and thrown them off someplace into a ship, and the ship deposited them on an island someplace. Then they make their way out of the bag and they’re out in the middle of the ocean, with no idea how they got there. So to stay with the breath, you have to be sensitive to what the mind is doing around the breath. And even when you’re focused on feelings, you can’t lose touch with the breath. And John Lee makes this point again and again. I remember being with Ajahn Foon, and he would make it repeatedly. It’s not that you leave the breath at some point and turn to feelings as your sole object. You’re looking at the feelings that develop around the breath. And, as the Buddha said, it’s the act of paying careful, continuous attention to the breath that you create a sense of well-being. By being sensitive to the breath, you smooth things out. Because when you’re not sensitive, the breath can get pretty jagged. But when you maintain that sense of smooth focus on the breath, the breath becomes smooth too. And the feeling of pleasure that results from the breath becomes smooth as well. So you hang on to the breath. Even when the in-and-out breath gets still, you want to stay right there. Learn how to cultivate that sense of being with total stillness in the body. It will have a tendency to get fuzzy around the edges, and eventually you’ll use it to get beyond the sense of form. But don’t be in too much of a hurry. That ability to stay balanced with the fourth jhana, where the breath is totally still, your awareness is filling the body. That’s important. As the Buddha said, he gained awakening from that state. And it was from that state that he entered total nirvana. So there’s something special there. And John Lee points out how that’s the state of concentration that gives you the most energy, the one where you’re getting the most rewards in terms of energy from the amount of energy you put in. So learn how to settle in there. Stay with the breath. Don’t be too quick to go jumping through the next hoop. Remember the simile of the inexperienced cow. Suddenly you get interested with the grass on the other side of the hill, the other side of the ravine. What’s the water like over there? What’s the grass like over there? And so the cow goes wandering down into the ravine and then can’t get out. What the image doesn’t say is that basically staying right where you are will get you to that other meadow. In other words, the meadow you’re in will develop really good grass and really good water. Just give it a chance. I’ll too often reread books about what this stage is supposed to be like and what that stage is supposed to be like, and we want to push it too hard. And I forget that it’s all about being right here and giving things a space in which they can develop in a natural way. All you have to do is provide the right circumstances, the right conditions, and then you can’t force things to grow at any other rate than the rate they’re going to grow. In other words, if you’re planting rice, it’s going to take three months. So you have to have the patience to be with it for three months, whatever the plant you’re planting has its own period of gestation. And it is possible to add fertilizer to speed things up a little bit, because there’s only so much you can do. And sometimes if you try to speed things up too fast, you ruin it. Some of those fertilizers can turn the plant into something poisonous. So you provide the conditions and the state of the mind and the breath they will develop. The problem is that with rice, if you’ve planted it for a couple of years in a row, you begin to know exactly when it’s going to ripen. But with the mind, as you go from one day to the next to the next, there’s nothing written down, there’s no easy pattern to measure your progress against. But you do have to have a sense of what the causes are and what the results are. The causes here are directing your thoughts to the breath, evaluating the breath, and staying with the breath as smoothly and consistently as possible. And then as you settle in and get into the fourth jhana, you find yourself more and more one with the breath you drop to direct your thought and evaluation. But that smooth, consistent focus, you’ve got to keep that going all the way. As John Lee says, you stay with that one stream of breath and it’ll take you all the way to the fourth jhana. It’s simply a matter of how you relate to the breath and the success with which you really can stay smoothly and consistently. So there’s nowhere else you have to go, nothing else you have to do. You don’t have to worry about feelings or mind states or whatever. They’ll impinge on you as you’re working with the breath, of course. But you don’t have to leave the breath in order to deal with them. There are cases where things aren’t going well and the Buddha recommends that you drop the breath for a while and you work with something else that improves the state of your mind. But that’s with the purpose of coming back. So try to develop an interest in the breath. Develop a sensitivity to the breath. Follow it as consistently as you can to see where it leads. This is one of the reasons why the Ajahns prefer that you not read too much Dhamma. Otherwise you spend your time speculating, “What about this passage? What about that passage? Aren’t I supposed to be seeing other things besides just the breath?” Everything you need to see will come right here. In fact, it’s already coming in many ways, just that you’re not here to welcome it. You’re here to notice it. So try to keep your focus as smooth and consistent as possible, and everything else will come together right there.

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