Single-mindedness

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There’s a lot of noise. It’s important that you not try to put up a fight against it. One technique I’ve found that works is to think of yourself as a big screen. The noise goes right through the screen without your having to react at all. John Cha had a nice comment. He said, “It’s not that the noise is disturbing us. We’re disturbing the noise, making an issue out of it.” Why do they do that? Why do they do this? Why does this noise have to be here? All these questions lead to irritation. That’s because we feel we have to react to the noise. That is destroying something that we’re trying to do right here. We’re trying to get the mind quiet. When you think about it, the noise doesn’t destroy your breath. The breath is still there. Even though you’d like to have a huge field of quietude around the breath, you can’t control that. There’s so much in the world that you can’t control. If you waited to get every single little detail down the way you like it, you’d never have any time to meditate. It’s important that you instead look at this desire to have every detail down the way you want it. You have to ask yourself, “Who are you to be passing judgment on everybody, everything around you? When did you become the National Bureau of Standards?” Instead, see that the mind is constantly commenting on things, constantly complaining about things. That’s the problem. When I talk about the sound of one hand clapping, if a sensory input comes in and the mind doesn’t go up and clap against it, then there’s nothing. There’s no sound. There’s no disturbance. We’ve got these senses. We’ve got sight, sound. We’ve got sense of sight, hearing, smell, sense of taste, sense of feeling. That means we’re open at all times to all kinds of sensations. Since a lot of these things are the results of past karma, there’s nothing much you can do about them. What’s important is that you create a sense of spaciousness in the mind, so these things don’t overwhelm you. The larger the sense of spaciousness, the smaller the disturbance is seen, and you get a much better perspective on these things that you find irritating. When the mind is narrow and its concerns are narrow, disturbances just fill your whole range of awareness, and they seem unbearable. They seem so big by comparison. So the trick is to learn to make your mind larger, both in the sense of getting a good perspective on things, realizing that this is the human situation, and also having a physically larger sense of awareness, a sense of awareness that fills your whole body. That allows more room for things to come and go, sensory input to come and go, thoughts can come and go, but they don’t knock over that larger sense of awareness, which gives you a good, solid foundation. It’s like lowering your sense of gravity, so things just don’t knock you over. You’re not so precariously balanced. When you create that sense of spaciousness, that sense of enlarged awareness, you begin to see things as they are. The more firmly you’re implanted in that sense of the body, the more you realize that those sensations are not affected by the noise of the airplanes, or the noise of somebody coughing, or the noise of the mice up in the ceiling. They’re all small things. As one is teaching in Swarthmore, in the room they gave us to meditate in, there was a very loud clock. Tick, tock, tick, tock. Very, very loud. At the end of the first meditation session, everybody opened their eyes, and all they could say was, “That clock!” Well, what did the clock do to them? Did it destroy the breath? Well, no. The breath was still there. The trick, when you’re concentrating, is to learn how to ferret out one particular type of sensation, or tune into this type of sensation, and let everything else go. Let it do its own thing. Let the house do its own thing up in the ceiling. Let the planes do their own thing up in the sky, the band down in the valley. This is an important lesson in the meditation. It’s learning to ferret one particular type of sensation out, and just stay tuned in to that type of sensation. It’s like tuning a radio. There are all kinds of frequencies going through the air right now, going right through us, from Los Angeles, San Diego, who knows where. If we had a radio here, we could tune it into one particular frequency, and that’s all that it would pick up. Everything else would go past. It so happened that the frequency tended to drift a little bit. Well, you could tune the radio to keep with the frequency. It’s the same with the breath. Sometimes the sensation of the breath in the body begins to drift a little bit, but if you’re paying careful attention, you can follow the drift and maintain your balance. It’s like learning to ride a wave. Then let everything else do its own thing. I once went to a music school in Seoul, Korea. The schools over there are very different from ours. Here in a music school, they have individual practice rooms. Each person has his or her own practice room, soundproofed to have as few distractions as possible. But over there, everybody in the school was practicing in the same room. In one corner, you’d have somebody doing Korean opera. In another corner, you’d have somebody doing a cajón. In another corner, you’d have somebody playing a reed instrument, or a drum, or whatever. The important lesson they learned in that room was how to focus, how to stay concentrated precisely on what you’re doing, and let everything else go. It’s good that you meditate every now and then in places that are less than ideal, or that situations that are less than ideal come here to the monastery. It’s to remind you precisely what concentration entails. It’s focusing in, maintaining that focus, staying tuned in to one particular level of sensation. This is what it means to have a frame of reference, a sense of the breath and the body. That’s your frame of reference. Everything else can be related to that. If it’s not related to that, you would let it go. It’s only when you can practice this that you can take that frame of reference out into the outside world. So even though you may be working, dealing with other people, you realize your frame of reference is still here. You stay tuned in. You stay in touch with it. That gives you the foundation you need to maintain your balance. So the other issues that come in, you realize, are irrelevant to what you’re doing. You don’t have to comment on them. You don’t have to interfere with them. You don’t have to get worked up by them. They’re just part of the world. As the Buddha said, what does the world have to offer? Well, it has gain and loss, status, loss of status, praise and criticism, pleasure and pain. The pain here means everything from heavy, heavy pain to disturbances, irritations. This is the way of the world. It’s got to have these things. It’s learning to maintain your balance in the midst of them. It’s an important skill in the meditation, an important skill in developing your mind. The basis of that skill is just this, the ability to maintain your foundation in spite of other disturbances. The trick to that is, as I said, just letting them happen. The reason they disturb you is because your mind wants to comment both on the breath and on the mouse and on the plane. It’s like trying to keep three conversations going all at once. You’re bound to get confused. But if you maintain one single conversation, the conversation about the breath, all those other things can go without comment, without reaction. So this is what it means to be focused, to have this one level of sensation. You take it as your topic, as your frame of reference, as your foundation, and do your best not to get knocked away by it. You have to realize that even though it’s in the same field of awareness as all these other distractions, you can stay tuned into it. Just like being in that music school, even though there are different melodies and different rhythms and different types of music all around you, you stay focused on the one melody that you’re working on. And you find that you can follow it, you can work with it. You don’t need to have absolute silence. You don’t need to have everything straightened out before you can concentrate. The whole trick of the concentration is staying focused in the midst of all these other things. This synonym of itself teaches you a lot of good qualities of mind. It teaches you equanimity. It teaches you a sense of priorities, what’s important, what’s not. It teaches you some very important lessons about karma, that no matter what the distractions, no matter how bad things may be outside, you want to make sure that your present intentions are as good as possible. And you don’t allow yourself to use other things to make excuses for a lack of your own skill, or a lack of your own intention to maintain that skill and develop that skill. The practice requires that kind of commitment. Being single-minded doesn’t mean that there are not other things happening around you, but you maintain that single-mindedness in spite of all the other temptations to get dual-minded and triple-minded and quadruple-minded. Once you develop this skill, you find it really is a lot easier to be focused on one thing than to try to follow all kinds of other things all at once. But until that point becomes easier, you’ve got to work at it. We always like to hear about how effort in the meditation is an effortless effort, that it will come naturally. Well, it comes naturally after you work at it. It’s like someone who works at being a good baseball player. There comes a point where it does finally seem to be effortless. But to get to that point requires a lot of practice. One way to make the effort easier is to learn how to let go of the things that you really don’t have any control over. This is one of the meanings of the not-self teaching. As the Buddha said, it’s because you don’t have control over feelings and perceptions and thought constructs and consciousness, all these things coming in at you from your past karma. Because you have no control over them, you should let them go. Focus instead on the things that you can control. Because that’s where your effort will give its best results.

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