Singleminded

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The world is swept away, does not endure, and offers no shelter. That’s a scary thought if you’re hoping to depend on the world. One of the purposes of that reflection is to remind you that if you’re going to find anything trustworthy or dependable in life, it has to be your own mind. But then, of course, you look at your own mind and see what you’ve got. Something that wanders all around changes itself all the time. The Buddha once said, “The mind is so quick to change that it’s hard to find a good analogy for how quick it is.” Here he was, the master of analogies, and this was one point where he was brought up short. There’s nothing out there that changes as quickly as the mind. And yet this is what we’ve got to depend on. So it’s going to mean work. People don’t like to hear that meditation is work. They’d like to hear that it’s a place to relax and forget about goals, entertainment, effort. But if you don’t have goals, why are you here? And if you’re not willing to put forth effort for your true happiness, what’s the point of it? So we’ve got to realize that this is going to be work. It’s going to take effort. And that means we have to have a good, strong desire to do this. They say that people who master skills are really good at a particular skill, whether it’s music, carpentry, sport, surgery. You have to start out with a strong sense that there are dangers in not being skillful, and there are a lot of advantages in developing that skill. So the reflection just now on the dangers of the world, that’s how to remind you why you’re here, the importance of what you’re doing. You’ve got to develop a refuge inside. We take refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. But on the outside level, they’re just examples. They’re not the actual refuge. The true refuge comes from the qualities that you build into the mind, that you develop in the mind. This requires focus. It requires your attention. It has to have top priority. In other words, you have to be single-minded about what you’re doing. It’s like playing chess. If you want to win, you’re going to have to sacrifice some of your pieces. You’re going to have to be willing to sacrifice them. The main difference between chess and training the mind is that those pieces aren’t really yours. You may have the white today, you may have the black tomorrow. But the things we have to sacrifice in the practice are a lot of things that we really do hold on to as ours. But you’ve got to learn how to regard them in the same way that you would chess pieces, things that can be sacrificed for a greater goal, such as your body. There are no points for finishing life with a really strong, fit body. You don’t win by dying with the most toys. What does matter is that your mind is in good shape, so you can depend on it even as aging, illness, and death come. Because at that point, there’s nothing else you can depend on. So you’ve got to be single-minded in your practice. The ability to be single-minded is really important, because otherwise the mind wanders off into other pathways and leaves the important work undone. This is why concentration is the heart of the path. You focus on one object, and you make your mind one as well. In the beginning, it’s simply a matter of being one in your intent. You’re going to spend as much time, devote as much energy as you skillfully can, to getting it to settle down. As the John Fung used to say, “You have to be crazy about meditation.” In other words, the sort of person who finds all sorts of opportunities to be with the breath throughout the day. It’s the same way that people are chocoholics, always finding excuses for having chocolate. They say chocoholics, when they go into the house, tend to pick up very quickly where the chocolate is kept, just like alcoholics know where the alcohol is kept. You want to be the sort of person who always knows where your breath is kept. The best way to do that, of course, is to have one place that you always keep it. That’s why one of the essential steps in the meditation is to find a spot in the body where you find it most natural to be focused, or a spot that’s really good for getting you out of your head if you find yourself too much in your thinking. John Lee recommends some of the points that in other traditions are called chakras. When you locate them in your body, you’re going to notice after a while that they’re like intersections for the breath energy. The one right at the center of the chest, at the point of the sternum, seems to be connected to every part of the body. At least, that’s the way it seems to me. You may find another spot where everything gets connected, where everything intersects. Learn how to make that your spot. Learn how to keep it comfortable. This is one of the tasks you can set for yourself throughout the day, how you can go through the day and make sure that that part doesn’t tense up. Because you’ll notice, if you’re not paying careful attention to it, that as soon as your attention slips off someplace else, especially outside to other things, your spot will get squeezed off. This is an old habit of ours. We want to pay careful attention outside. We’ve got to squeeze off all the input from inside the body. So what you’ve got to learn is how to be aware outside and inside at the same time, how to maintain this spot. Keep it wide open. Allow it to have a sense of fullness, that it’s one spot in the body where you don’t have to pull the breath in or push it out; it’s automatically connected. As soon as there’s the thought that you need some more in-breath, it’s right there. As soon as there’s the thought that the breath can go out, you don’t have to push it out from anywhere; it will go out from right there. Think of it in that way, so as to minimize the amount of effort or tension you bring to that spot. The effort here has to be totally mental. So when you’re dealing with other issues, starting, say, with just walking meditation, learning how to walk and be focused on your spot at the same time. That’s an important skill in the meditation, learning how to be still in the midst of motion. Again, this requires a single-minded determination. You’re going to stay right here. You can’t blot out other things, otherwise you’ll run into the trees and the avocado grove, or you’ll fall off the path. So you’ve got to be aware of what you’re doing, where you’re going. But at the same time, you have to maintain your center inside. Think of it as carrying a bowl full of oil, full to the brim. Each time you get to the end of the meditation path, as you turn around, just stop for a second and remind yourself, “Am I here? Can I make it to the other end of the path without dropping anything, spilling anything?” In the beginning, you have to keep your attention focused on short intervals like that, that are manageable. Then you begin to gain a sense of balance around this spot. So you can be aware of the world outside, be aware of the motion of your body, but be centered, really solidly centered right here. Then try to carry that same center into your other activities so that no matter what you’re doing, you can still have the sense of being sensitive to the center, allowing it to feel wide open and at ease. This is good for the body. If the mind is going to stay in the present, it’s good to have a good, comfortable place for it to stay. Otherwise, it’s going to try going to find its pleasure someplace else. When you’re sitting here still, maintain that center, but at the same time, think of it spreading out—the sense of ease, the sense of well-being, the sense of fullness that you’ve been able to maintain. Think of it seeping out, permeating out throughout the body. In John Lee’s example, it’s a cloth that you can either hold in your fist or you can unravel so it’s a meter or two wide or long. In other words, there’ll be times throughout the day when you need to have this strong sense of the center, just at that one spot. There are other times when it’s good to think of it filling or not filling your whole body—the ease, the fullness, the energy of the breath permeating everything, up around your head, into your eyelids, down, spaces between your fingers, all the little nooks and crannies of your body. And as you develop this, you begin to find that you can trust the mind more, because one thing in not being willing to let go is a useful habit to have in all your activities. You can trust yourself because you’ve learned to associate a sense of well-being, a sense of ease, a sense of safety and security with your ability to hold on to that one object. So the meditation, instead of being about battle against an enemy, becomes more a sense of having your safe spot, your secure spot, protecting it from all the forces inside and outside that would pull you away or lure you away. So remember that image from John Lee, the white cloth that you can hold in your fist and fill the whole body with as you need it. When you get really good at it, then you can maintain that sense of the center and the sense of the full body, even as you’re doing other activities. But the center is crucial. So work at being single-minded as single-mindedly as you can.

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