

## *Single-minded*

*November 7, 2006*

*The world is swept away. It does not endure. It 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. Then, of course, you look at your own mind, and what have you got? Something that wanders all around, changes itself all the time. The Buddha once said that the mind is so quick to change direction 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 that changes as quickly as the mind.

Yet this is what we've got to depend on. So it's going to require work. People don't like to hear that meditation is work. They like to hear that it's a place to relax and forget about effort, goals, and attainment. But if you don't have goals, why are you here? If you're not willing to put forth effort for your true happiness, what do you want to put forth effort for? So we've got to realize this is going to be the 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've mastered skills, who are really good at a particular skill—whether it's music, carpentry, sports, surgery—have to start out with a strong sense that there are dangers in not being skillful, and a lot of advantages in developing that skill. So the reflection just now on the dangers of the world is there to remind you of why you're here, the importance of what you're doing. You've got to develop the skills that provide 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 you build into the mind, that you develop in the mind. Those qualities require focus, they require your attention, they have 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 have to sacrifice some of your pieces—and you 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 things we really do hold on to as ours. But you've got to learn how

to regard them the same way that you would regard chess pieces: things that can be sacrificed for a greater goal.

Start with your body. You don't get points for finishing life with a really strong body. You don't win by dying with the most toys or the best physical shape. What does matter is that your mind is in good shape so that you can depend on it even as aging, illness, and death come—because at those times, 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. Otherwise, the mind wanders off in to 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 Ajaan Fuang used to say, you have to be crazy about meditation. In other words, be the sort of person who finds all sorts of opportunities to be with the breath throughout the day, the same way that people who are chocoholics always find excuses for having chocolate. They say that chocoholics, when they go into a house, tend to pick up very quickly where the chocolate is kept, just as alcoholics know where the alcohol is kept. You want to be the sort of person who always knows where your breath is kept at all times.

The best way to do that, of course, is to have one place where you always keep it. So one of the essential steps in 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 into your thinking. Ajaan Lee recommends some of the points that in other traditions are called chakras. When you locate them in your body, you notice after a while that they're like the 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 how 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 tests you can set for yourself: how you can go through the day and make sure that that part doesn't tense up. You notice that if you're not paying careful attention to it, then 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, so we feel instinctively that we've got to squeeze off all the input from inside the body. What you've got to learn is how to be aware outside and inside at the same time. You've got to maintain that 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 a 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'll 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 there has to be totally mental.

So when you're dealing with other activities—starting, say, with just walking meditation—learn how to walk and be focused on your spot at 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 that you're going to stay right here. You can't blot out other things, otherwise you'll run into trees in the avocado grove or 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 meditation path and you turn around, just stop for a second to remind yourself: "Am I here? Can I make it to the other end of the path without spilling anything?"

In the beginning you have to keep your attention focused on short intervals like that, which are manageable. You begin to gain a sense of balance around this spot, so that you can be aware of the world outside, be aware of the motion in the body, yet still 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 be sensitive to the center, allowing it to feel wide open and at ease. This is good for the body and for the mind. 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 to find its pleasure someplace else.

When you're sitting here still, maintain that center, but at same time think of spreading the sense of ease, the sense of well-being, the sense of fullness that you've been able to maintain there. Think of it seeping out, permeating out throughout the body. Ajaan Lee's example is of a cloth that you can either hold in your fist or unravel so that it's a meter or two wide or long. In other words, there will be times throughout the day when you need to have this strong sense of that center, just at that one spot. There will be other times when it's good to think of it filling your whole body: the ease and the fullness, the energy of the breath permeating everything, up around your head, into your eyelids, down to the spaces between your fingers, all the little nooks and crannies of your body.

As you develop this, you begin to find that you can trust the mind more, because this habit of sticking with one thing and 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 spot. That way, the meditation, instead of being a 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 or lure you away.

So remember that image from Ajaan Lee, the white cloth that you can hold in your fist, all crumpled up—but don't have a crumpled feeling, just think of it as something that you can hold in your fist—or you can spread to fill the whole body as you need it. When you get really good at it, then you can maintain that sense of the center and the sense of 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.