

Affirming Faith in Mind (21) Equal Mind

Peter Thompson

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Wombat Sangha Meditation Group

“With single mind one with the Way, all ego-centred strivings cease.”

Tonight I want to focus on this one line. This line could be used for a million years of practice.

Single-mindedness we know in our ordinary life can achieve what it sets out to achieve, whether it is the Prime Minister who single-mindedly wanted to become prime minister, or a tennis champion who dreamed of becoming a great champion as a child. We see it in many aspects of life and it invariably brings success in that area in which it is being exercised.

Sometimes when we are young children we were criticized for being one-minded. I remember my grandmother used to always say to me, “Peter, you always have such a one-track mind!” It was almost a form of criticism because they couldn’t get you for dinner or you were involved in some pursuit. Just concentrating on that activity was seen as something difficult to work with when you didn’t respond immediately to the adults’ calls.

That quality is a favorable thing in our Dharma practice. We are supported by the Three Treasures, which is an incredible offering from the Universe. Someone once said that human life is somewhere in between the different worlds possible for life. In Buddhist terms there is the heaven world where people have it incredibly easy where they don’t have to make any effort. Then there are the hell realms that are the opposite where people are struggling against difficult circumstances. When I’m watching the news on TV it seems like I am watching versions of this realm. Famine, war, the killing of endangered species: you feel you are watching a hell realm.

For most human life we are lucky to be in a situation where there is just enough suffering to spur us on, but not overwhelming enough to make us forget our practice. We are not struggling to survive in the moment so we have enough consciousness to want to do the practice.

Having said that, there is still a need for practice and single mindedness doesn’t come from having things too easy. If things are too difficult, one is overwhelmed. Either of those situations is not conducive to having a single-minded practice.

What leads us to become single minded? Aitken Roshi used to say, “It builds. It builds with practice.” The Third Patriarch says a few lines earlier, *“When all is seen with equal mind, to our Self-nature we return”*.

Equal mind, to most people in the world, is a very boring state of mind. Younger people say they want to have a gap year and travel. Some of them are

still on their gap year at the age of thirty. In our Buddhist practice this restlessness would be seen as a hindrance. Restlessness is one of the five hindrances. The opposite is slothfulness, laziness.

When people first encounter a seven-day sesshin one of the first things they encounter and what they fear most is boredom. They can have withdrawal symptoms from their busy lives. There is nothing outside to support them and they have to find support from within. This can be shocking for those people dependent on outside activities. So to stay a full seven days in sesshin is an incredibly difficult thing to do.

Kosho Uchiyama Roshi (Japan,) used to say that boredom is the taste of Zen. The Third Patriarch says here, "*When all is seen with equal mind*". The state of "*equal mind*" is seen by most people as a very boring state. Then, when you start to go into it you see that it is your true state, your true nature. To thinking mind it is a boring place, the last place it wants to go, hence all the movement and strategies to avoid it. When you get a taste of it, and you finally relax into it, it becomes a source of nourishment. But the first taste of it is boring to thinking mind.

The modern age is one where people find it easy to get bored. The modern world of technology spawns boredom. Frenetic excitement rules where once we lived a quiet rural existence where you did simple things like milk the cow, till the field, or watch the sunset. Modern life needs continuous lifestyle excitement.

Into that world the need for the Dharma is even greater than ever because the amount of people suffering is greater, in a psychological sense, than it has ever been. It is certainly more exacerbated. When we first come to the practice there may be a sense of boredom. Coming back to your breath is simple, but may be seen as terribly boring. There is a great saying in Japan that to know what it is to make bread you have to make bread a thousand times. This applies to anything. Do it a million times! Somehow you get better and better at doing that thing.

It is very character building but the modern mind is not interested in doing that kind of work. The practice is a continuing commitment to a very simple thing.

It is said that the taste of realization is always salty. If you taste the ocean, it is salty. If you come back in one year's time, it is still salty. It never changes its flavour. It is the same as the realization of the mystical path. It is always like that – equal mind.

When you get some taste of the practice and you don't run away, and you stay with it, then you realize that's the only place to be. All the other movements one may have tasted were all part of a restless nature. Seeking something here, chasing something there – it is a restlessness, moving around.

The quality of the single mind is one of relaxing and settling down, going a bit deeper than the superficial layers. Aitken Roshi used to say, "When you come to sit, sit beneath the conscious mind." It is a bit like the ocean turbulence on the surface. As you go deeper it is more still and relaxed. It is a bit like our practice.

To come to that place is very much about sticking with something that may initially seem boring. I like to talk to many different Zen teachers. They all have small groups. The groups are small because most people are not interested in boredom but they don't understand that beneath that initial boredom there is an incredibly alive, fecund creativity just underneath.

When one makes the continual effort to practice it becomes the mainstay of one's life. The taste is always salty, so to speak. It will always be salty. When the effort is there, single mindedness grows. When single mindedness grows all the other things start to drop away. My grandmother's calling out to me to come to dinner dropped away with my single-minded focus on my stamp collection. I forgot everything in the activity of uniting with the stamp collection.

Robert Aitken used to say that Zen is the act of forgetting yourself in the act of uniting with something. We don't try to get rid of any of the distractions. We don't try to get rid of these ego-centred strivings that the Third Patriarch talks about. The single-minded practice is enough. Always just coming back, a thousand times, is enough to get that sense of the dropping away of everything else. We don't have to try to get rid of anything.

This is effortless effort. I discovered one way to practice effortless effort with the help of Ramana Maharshi, who asked, "Who is making the effort?" This works well especially if the effort is a little too strong. Ask yourself, who is making this effort. When you ask this, you won't find any effort-maker there. When you ask this question you will find the effort becomes effortless because there is no effort-maker. The effort-maker is the "*ego-centred striving*" that the Third Patriarch talks about. There is no effort-maker – effortless effort comes about naturally by itself.

When you look for who is making the effort, you won't find anyone, but you have to ask, you have to look. We assume that one is sitting here trying to get enlightened. We assume this is the case, trying to get somewhere else. As soon as one asks the question, who is making this effort, I don't find anyone. There is no ego-effort there. It is effort making the effort. That IS effortless effort.

It is an interesting enquiry. It is something I discovered after many years of trying. "Who is doing this, who is trying?" It takes the sting out of the trying and the effort becomes effortless just through that question. If you are not already making a strong effort this question won't mean so much.

It is a beautiful line, "*With single mind one with the Way, all ego-centred strivings cease.*" The Way is whatever is in front of us at this moment. That is the Way. Single mind with whatever is in front of us, uniting with what is in front of us, forgetting the self.

What does single-mindedness mean for you?