

Non-verbal Discernment

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There's a passage where the Buddha says that if you want to master jhana and get really good at right concentration, you need both tranquility and insight. In other words, you don't just force the mind down. If you want the mind to be *willing* to settle down, you have to understand its causes and effects—what works, what doesn't work—remembering that the insights you use don't necessarily have to be verbalized. After all, think about it: Insight has to do with value judgments—what's worth doing, what's not worth doing; what gets good results, what doesn't get good results. Sometimes you know these things without having to verbalize too much.

When you're cooking food, you know when something is done. If something is not quite right with the sauce or with whatever you're making, you have an idea of what needs to be done—and some of that's not very verbalized. When you taste it and it's just right, that's all you need to know—just right. You're done. You're ready.

This is one of the reasons why Ajaan Lee often talks about meditation as being like a manual skill. The knowledge of a manual skill is often very un-verbalized. When you're planing some wood, for example, your sense of what is just right—the right amount of pressure to put on the plane as you run it along, how deeply to cut—is not necessarily verbalized. You have a sense of what *feels* right.

Well, it's the same with settling the mind: Get a sense of what kind of breath feels right for settling the mind, where you want it focused, how broad you want your focus to be. Some people will verbalize this more than others, but the important thing is the skill.

And remember, it took a Buddha to come up with the vocabulary that we use for our meditation. There have been a lot of people who gain full awakening, like the private Buddhas, who couldn't formulate the Dhamma. They sensed their way into awakening, recognized it when it came, but couldn't put it into words. Or you can look at the different forest ajaans: Some of them are people of very few words who don't explain much; others are very articulate.

But just because someone is articulate doesn't mean that his or her knowledge is better than someone who's not articulate. After all, freedom is not a matter of words. It comes from seeing things that you're doing for the sake of happiness, realizing that they're not getting the results you want, and thinking of other things

you might do instead. That kind of value judgment is not necessarily verbalized, but it is discernment.

So, as you work with the mind, try to get a sense of it: how much pressure you can put on it, how much pressure you put on the breath, so that you can stay with the breath, but you don't force the breath too much. If the pressure is not right, the mind won't settle down. If there's too much pressure on the breath, you feel confined. If there's too little, you float away. So, how can you stay with the breath consistently? And how can you keep the mind happy to be there consistently? The mind likes a lot of variety, and you have to train it to *like* being here in a very quiet place.

It's like being a watchman in a forest: You're up in the watchtower alone. Some people go there simply because they like being alone, but after a while they get hungry for human companionship. But if someone comes to visit, you can't let your vigilance down. You have to keep an eye out on the horizon, all around, because if any fires get started, you want to see them quickly. The more quickly you see them, the easier they are to put out.

So you have to develop a skill: the skill of being quiet and being happy to be quiet. You can play around with the breath, but then as the breath gets more and more subtle, there comes a point where if you really want to get the mind to settle down, you have to stop playing and just be with an all-around sense of the body, very much *one* with the breath. Fortunately, the breath gives you a reward when you do that. There's a strong sense of pleasure that goes along with that. Some people even sense it as rapture. At the very least, it's refreshment.

But then that, too, begins to seem gross and falls away. You have to keep training the mind: "This is a good place to stay. It's good to stay here. Why do you want to go any place else? Why are you looking for trouble?" Learn how to appreciate a concentrated mind. Have respect for concentration.

We tell ourselves that we want well-being, and yet when it comes, you get bored. So ask yourself, "What's wrong with the well-being?" It will, of course, have its drawbacks. After all, concentration is not perfect, but to get beyond it you have to know it well, to sense its ups and downs.

Here again, it's not so much an issue of verbalizing. Just notice: When does the stress go up, when does it go down? When it goes up, what did you do? What perception came, what feeling came in? When the stress level goes down, what perception did you let go of? Those are things that you *feel* your way into. And as you let go, let go... as Ajaan Mahā Boowa points out, when you see something that's not worth holding on to, it doesn't matter whether you tell yourself it's

inconstant, or stressful, or not-self, or don't say any of those things, you just have a sense: "This is not worth it," and you let go. That's where the real discernment lies.

The terms, the perceptions, are simply aids to help convince you that this is something you really don't want to go with, no matter how much you've liked it in the past. But if for whatever other reason you notice that it's just not worth it and you let go, that counts as discernment.

Part of our problem is that we understand knowledge as having to be in words. This is reflected in the history of Western philosophy: Philosophers very quickly get into questions of what they call epistemology—the study of how we know things. And the basic paradigm for how we know things is looking at things, and realizing that we formulate a lot of assumptions about things as we look at them in order to deal with them.

After all, your visual field is your most active sensory field. There's a lot of verbalization that goes on simply in trying to figure out, if you see something: Is it true or is it not true? Is it a mirage? How do you test?

Whereas, in Indian thought, especially prior to the Buddha, the basic paradigm was not the act of looking at something, it was the act of eating. This, they said, was the basic function of a human being, of any being: eating. The Buddha himself said that this was what we all have in common: All beings need to feed.

And when you're eating something, it's not the question of whether that thing exists or not. The fact that it's filling you up: That's fulfilling a function. The question, "Is it healthy for you? Will it be good for you in the long term?" That's a different series of questions, and questions like that don't have to be verbalized so much.

Part of it is, if it tastes good or if it doesn't taste good. Even if you don't verbalize it beyond saying, "This is horrible," you spit it out.

With other things, you have to be more careful: Something may taste good, but it may not be good for you. That's a whole different set of questions. But remember, a lot of eating is non-verbal, and yet a lot of discernment goes into what you should and should not eat.

What this gets down to is what the Romans called the difference between scribe knowledge and warrior knowledge. Scribe knowledge had to be expressed in words. It was a matter of definitions. Warrior knowledge was simply a matter of knowing your skills, knowing your weapon, knowing your enemy.

And as you know a weapon, know an enemy, or know your horse or your other aids as you fight, sometimes you have a sense that your horse needs to rest. Well, how did you say that to yourself? You just *know*. Sometimes you get a sense of how

to use your weapons, you get a sense of what your opponent is like. Often this sense is not verbalized, but it counts as knowledge.

Even if the only war that you're engaged in is doing battle with food in the kitchen, it's the same sort of thing. You get a piece of food. What do you do with it? How does it need to be done? When it's done, how do you *know* that it's done? You have a sense.

It's the same with the mind. Have a sense of when it's ready to settle down. Have a sense of when it's beginning to get unsettled.

That kind of knowledge deals with cause and effect. Which causes are worth going with, which ones are not—based on the effects: That's where the insight lies.