Knowledge, Verbal & Not

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The Buddha once listed three ways of developing discernment. The first is through listening. Nowadays, that would include reading as well. The second is through thinking things through. And the third is through developing. In the first case, you learn discernment by learning the difference between what different words mean, how to make distinctions, how to get information about things. People will point out things to look for. And unless you think things through, that’s just a random collection of little facts. It’s not real knowledge. For it to become knowledge, you have to get a little bit more systematic. That’s why you have to think things through. But that’s not the real knowledge we’re looking for. You can think things through and, as the Buddha said, you can still be wrong. You have to put things to the test. That’s where the developing comes in. Try to develop good qualities in the mind, skillful qualities in the mind. In the course of doing that, you’ll learn a lot. You’ll learn a lot about cause and effect, how cause and effect actually happen in the mind. You make up your mind to do something, and sometimes the mind will obey and sometimes it won’t. So you’ve got to figure out what’s wrong. And in the course of figuring things out in a very practical way, that’s how you learn about cause and effect in the mind. John Lee’s analogy is of learning a manual skill. The teacher can teach you about, say, how to weave a basket. This goes here, that goes there. And then you try it, and your basket doesn’t look like the teacher’s. So you try to figure out what went wrong, and you try another one. If that one’s not quite right, we figure out what’s wrong there. You keep this up until eventually you’ve got some good-looking baskets. What you’ve learned is you’ve learned from your actions. It’s more than just thinking things through. You have to act on things and see what works and what doesn’t work. The Lamas complained to the Buddha that they’d heard so many different teachings from so many different people, all of which were very contradictory. They had no idea of how to figure out who to believe in. He said, “Look what happens when you take a particular teaching and act on it. What kind of results do you get? That’s how you judge what’s true and what’s not true, what’s beneficial and what’s not beneficial.” Because there are a lot of things that are true that are not necessarily beneficial. We want something more than just a true fact. We want something that’s good for the mind. At least a true happiness, a true sense of well-being, a well-being that doesn’t change. And that’s something that’s non-verbal. Pain is non-verbal. Well-being is non-verbal. Words can point you in that direction. They can point you into what to do. But the actual experience of pain, of suffering, is something that’s very unique. We knew pain before we even knew anything about words. We knew well-being. And we can’t take our pain out and show it to other people. You can talk about it, you can describe it, but it’s not the same thing. The words are one thing, but the actual pain is something else. The same with the well-being. So that’s our test. The ultimate test of whether something works or not is something that’s non-verbal. So you want to get yourself sensitive to this non-verbal part of the mind, this non-verbal part of your awareness. This is one of the things that concentration does. You get the mind to settle down, try to be focused on the breath. And when it’s finally willing to settle down, there’ll be a sense of well-being that comes, even a sense of rapture. And you learn how to use those. They’re not the goal of the practice. They’re part of the path. They take you someplace else. The places they take you is learning how to get out of your conversation inside your head, all the good things and bad things that are said inside the head. You need a place to step outside. So you’re just with the actual sensation of the breathing, trying to be there as consistently as possible. And for the time being, whether any insights come up, that doesn’t matter. You’re trying to get the mind to be willing to stay with this sensation. So it has a place where it can step outside of its thoughts. We live in a culture that has lots of different values. And one of the things we’ve learned is that no matter what you do, somebody’s going to be able to criticize you from their point of view. And so when a negative voice comes up in the mind, you have to ask yourself, “What’s that? Who did you learn that from, that particular judgment?” And then your way of sorting through the different judgments, “Where did you learn that from?” It’s good to have a part of the mind where you can step out and ask these questions. I had the advantage when I was practicing that I was in another culture, staying with the Chan Foo. I’d sometimes have issues come up from my past. Or things that were really bothering me in the present moment. And I mentioned it to Chan Foo, and he looked at me with a very quizzical look and began to realize that a lot of my internal conversation was really dependent on the particulars of my background and the culture I came from. And that culture was not necessarily designed for the sake of my happiness, or anybody’s happiness, for that matter. So it’s good to have a place to step out to try to learn how to get a sense of being secure with the breath. And change your concept of the breath while you’re at it. It’s not just the air coming in and out of the lungs. There’s an energy flow in the body. Without that, we’d be paralyzed. There’s energy that flows in the nerves, energy that flows in the body. There’s bloodstreams. Can you feel that? It’s there. And as you become more sensitive to that, your sense of your awareness begins to get a little bit decentralized. It’s not so much up in the head anymore. You realize that there’s an awareness in your feet, there’s an awareness in your toes, there’s an awareness in your fingers, in your hands. And you want to be sensitive to that. When you’re fully with the whole body, there’s not much thinking that can go on. The awareness is keeping track of so many things all at once. But just enough to tell you, “Does this feel comfortable or not?” If it doesn’t feel comfortable, you can change. Where are you putting unnecessary pressure on the body? Where is the unnecessary tension? If you find yourself slumping, ask yourself, “What is it in the front of the body that’s pulling me down? Can I release that tension?” Just maintain enough so that your posture is erect and balanced. And think of all the muscles that you can sense in the body as relaxing. Allow the breath to flow, this energy to flow. And if you’re really sensitive, you find that, yes, it does move in waves, together with the in-and-out breath. And there are many levels of this energy. Take that as your refuge, away from your thoughts. So you have a place to stand. You have an awareness that can look at the thoughts from outside, see them as processes. Because that’s how you begin to see through them. It’s like watching a play. If you’re out in the audience, you can get carried away by the illusion that there are real characters up there having real emotions. And they’re very careful to hide things from you. Things behind the scenery, they hide. And when they change the scenery, they bring the curtain down. Because it would destroy the illusion if you saw them moving the scenery around. When the scenery’s in place, then the curtain comes up. If you’re behind the scenes, you get to see how it actually happens, how the illusion is maintained. And you don’t fall for it nearly as much. You may admire someone for their skill in portraying an emotion, but you really see clearly that they are portraying something. It’s not a real emotion happening there. It’s all make-believe. In the same way, when you get with the breath, it’s like going behind the scenes. You can begin to see how a thought forms. There’s a little stirring of energy in the area where the mind and the body meet. At the beginning, it’s hard to identify whether this is physical or mental. It’s just a stirring in your awareness. Then something in the mind will slap a label on it and say, “This is either a physical sensation or it’s a thought. And if it’s a thought, what’s the thought about?” Then an image will come and you slap the image on, and then you run with it. As long as you just see the full-blown thought, it’s easy to fall for it. But when you see that it gets formed in these ways, and some of them are pretty arbitrary, then you don’t have to fall for the voices in the mind that say this and that, especially the negative voices, the ones that are destructive. You can begin to see how they form and what is in the mind that wants them to be a negative voice, and where it’s picked up that negative voice. It’s like little children learning words from their parents, and the parents don’t want the children to know, but the children are listening. They pick them up. And the parents are embarrassed when they realize, “Oh, this is the actual language that I’m using. It comes back at me.” But in the same way, we’ve picked up lots of voices from various people throughout our lives, lots of ways of speaking, ways of thinking. And you want to put the mind in a position where it can decide whether it wants to go with those old ways or not. And the first step is seeing how arbitrary they are. And being with the sensation of the energy in the body puts you in a place where you can see that clearly. So you want a part of your awareness that’s not verbal, that’s not thought out. There’ll be a little bit of verbalizing as you get the mind to settle down, but it gets more and more minimal as it begins to settle in. And although it may seem dumb, it’s not thinking of anything clever at the time. It’s putting you in a position where you can see things you didn’t see before, and you gain a discernment that can’t come just from thinking or just from listening. And it’s that level of discernment that’s actually liberating. So we listen and we think so we can go beyond just listening and thinking. We develop qualities of the mind so we actually go beyond the developing. We learn how to use these things as tools. And as the Buddha found, they can take you to a well-being that’s more than you could ever imagine.

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