

Discernment in Concentration

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The fourth base of success, *vīmaṃsā*, can be translated in lots of ways: circumspection, analysis, ingenuity. Essentially, it's the discernment factor in the bases of success. One passage in the Canon equates it with knowing in terms of the four noble truths. The four noble truths may seem awfully far away, but basically they are the Buddha's problem-solving approach: pointing out that the big problem in life is the fact that we cause ourselves suffering, and offering a solution to that problem.

If you're going to solve any kind of problem, you first have to look for the cause. Once you've found the cause, then you solve it at the cause, not at the result. In other words, the cause here is craving and ignorance, so we have to develop a path that can attack the problem of craving and ignorance.

It's like going into a house. There's smoke filling the house. If you try to put out the smoke, you'll never come to the end of it. You've got to find the fire. Once you've found the fire, you put out the fire, and then the smoke is no longer a problem.

In the same way, we have to tackle the problem of suffering right here at the mind, because the cause is in the mind. And we have to attack not right at the suffering, but at the cause—and we need to develop the discernment that can find the cause there in the mind. We gain practice in that discernment as we meditate, because the concentration has its discernment factor, which is called *vicāra*, evaluation. As you use your powers of evaluation in getting the mind to settle down, you're getting into your practice and thinking in terms of the four noble truths. You look at why the mind doesn't settle down. That's the problem you've got to solve. And then you look for the causes. And in this case, sometimes the causes are in the body, sometimes they're in the mind. You try experimenting with the breath. You see if you can make the breath a better place to stay. You try, you try, and you try again. What's important is that you don't give up.

Think of the Buddha. Before he came to awakening, he didn't have any guarantees that he would gain awakening. All he knew was that he really wanted

it, and that his life wasn't worthwhile if didn't find it—or at least make the effort to find it. So he kept at it, again and again. He made many mistakes. Think about it: six whole years of self-torture. But, he was finally able to realize that self-torture was a mistake. So he put it aside and kept going. He didn't give up. He kept looking for new ways to tackle the problem and finally succeeded.

It's the same with us. We have to keep tackling the problem from different angles until we find the solution. We have the advantage that we have teachers who can give us suggestions. But even then, their suggestions are general principles. We have to learn how to apply those principles to our own individual case.

For instance, with the breath: Ajaan Lee says to think of the breath as going down the spine, but sometimes you find that when you have a weak back, it's better to think of the breath coming up the spine—starting from the soles of the feet, going all the way up the legs and up through the spine.

So you take the basic principles and play with them.

The same with the mind: If you find that the mind is the problem in settling down, you try to find some way of thinking that can cut through the problem, at least for the time being.

If anger is a problem, you're not going to be able to uproot anger quite yet, but at the very least you can cut through the stalk. Find some way of talking to yourself, such as, "This is not really what I want to get into. I don't need this." You might think of anger as a kind of food that you're chewing on, but it's a miserable kind of food, the kind of food you'd be embarrassed to have anyone see you chewing on—any perception that can help you at least get past the anger for the time being.

In this way, you begin to use your own ingenuity: finding the problem, trying to figure out the cause, and then trying different ways of attacking the cause. This is how you develop your discernment. It's not the case that when you're practicing concentration you have to get the mind still and *then* sometime later use your discernment. You first have to use your discernment to get the mind to settle down to begin with. Only when you can get the mind to settle down can you really understand it. Because discernment is about understanding the mind, you can't skip this step. If you don't understand the mind well enough to get it stilled, you're

not going to be able to go beyond this. There are higher levels of discernment, but everything you need to know about is right here.

For example, the five aggregates: You've got the breath, which is form. You've got the pleasure that comes with being with the breath: That's feeling. There's the perception that holds you with the breath, the image of the breath that you have in mind that helps you stay with the breath: That's perception. You're thinking about the breath and adjusting the breath, evaluating how to make the breath comfortable and, once it's comfortable, evaluating how to keep it comfortable, and then when you have a solid sense of comfort, how to spread it so that it fills the body: All of that is fabrication. And then there's your consciousness, your awareness of all this. These are the things you're going to need to know, and this is the best way to get to know them: by turning them into concentration, a state of body and mind where things come together.

So it's important that you realize that as you're doing concentration you're also developing your discernment. Discernment is not just a matter of being clever in memorizing what's in the books. It's a matter of learning to see a problem, get sensitive to the cause, and then figure out ways of attacking the cause. That's how your discernment grows. You can memorize books for years and years and have all that knowledge in your head, but if you don't know how to use it to solve this problem, it's never going to do you much good.

Ajaan Lee says that we're working on a skill here. Part of the skill you learn from a teacher. For example, if you're going to make a basket, the teacher teaches you how you weave the basket, how to make different designs in the weave, and what shapes you can attempt. Then you have to make your own basket—and your first basket is not going to look like the teacher's. If you give up at that point, you'll never gain any skill. If you decide on the basis of that one basket that you have no talent, then you'll never develop the skill at all. But if you say, "I've just got to learn; the next one I'll do better." You look at the first one, see where it's not good, what's wrong with it, then you try to make adjustments. If the second one's not quite good enough yet, you keep making adjustments until finally you get a basket that's satisfactory. In that way, you've learned not just from what the teacher's told you, but mostly from your own actions.

Seeing problems and trying to figure out solutions: That's how your discernment grows. That's how you develop a manual skill, and the same principle applies here. You can learn the basic principles, but then, in applying the principles, you've got to use your own powers of judgment, your own powers of perception, your own ingenuity. All of this comes under the fourth base of success—and that's what brings all the others to completion.