

Not naming, not labeling objects

This article is an introductory summary of the teachings of Zen Master Thích Thông Triệt on the topic, mainly based on the oral teaching of Bhikkhuni Zen Master Thích Nữ Triệt Như given for the Fundamental Meditation Course. For a comprehensive in-depth understanding, the reader is encouraged to attend the complete nine-seminar teaching program and read the writings of Master Thích Thông Triệt that are being progressively translated into English.

Not naming objects

We initially practice this technique by keeping the tip of our tongue touching the base of the lower front teeth. This is in order to inhibit the language formation process and stop the inner talk in our mind. This is an initial step. Once we have practiced consistently, we won't need to use the tip of the tongue. We will open our eyes and see everything very clearly without any naming arising in our head.

When we practice, we maintain our awareness but we do not have any inner talk. Therefore, we experience the wordless awareness mind. This is why Master Thích Thông Triệt put this technique in the category of samādhi meditation techniques, because it helps the practitioner experience wordless awareness very quickly.

Not naming objects is a technique to still our mind. When the mind is still, it does not get attached to external phenomena and is not subject to prejudice. Attachment and prejudice come from a mind that is agitated as a result of thinking with the thinking mind and differentiating with our consciousness. When the mind is agitated, thoughts about good or evil, right or wrong, sadness or joy, like or dislike will arise, accompanied by sorrow.

When we name an object, we develop a concept of what the object is. The object is then immediately present in our consciousness. When we stop the false mind's habit of thinking and differentiating, our wordless awareness mind – our true mind – immediately becomes present and we will experience peace and tranquility.

When we open our eyes and see an object without any naming, we do not judge, like or dislike the object, and therefore our mind is at peace. In contrast, as soon as we name the object, we will immediately have thoughts about its characteristics and qualities, and start to have judgment and emotions about the object. When we stop the first step, i.e. naming, we cut the whole chain and our mind is at peace.

We can practice anytime, anywhere, in all four positions and using any sense organs. For example, we can eat spicy food without saying in our head "this is hot". Or we can see a beautiful person, recognize the beauty without saying "what a beautiful person". We still recognize everything because the knowing through wordless awareness is very accurate and clear, indeed superior to the knowing through the prefrontal cortex areas. The knowing through the prefrontal cortex areas is distorted by thinking, differentiating, and by our biases and emotions. In contrast, the knowing through the wordless awareness mind is objective, clear and accurate.

Knowing that a person is beautiful yet remaining detached is knowing with the wordless awareness mind. When we have other thoughts, such as like or dislike, praise or criticism, the false mind comes into action. With the wordless awareness mind, we see very clearly, we know very clearly without any thoughts of like or dislike, praise or criticism arising. This is different from not seeing or not knowing.

Effect of practice

When we experience wordless awareness in a steady and enduring manner, we experience the "samādhi without inner talk and inner dialogue" which is the foundation of all forms of Buddhist meditation. From there, the wordless awareness mind becomes steadily present and spiritual insights progressively develop. Spiritual insights develop through a progressive process and not all at once. They include intuition, creativity, benevolence, compassion, empathetic joy, equanimity and eloquence. Eloquence would manifest as the capacity to teach the dhamma without obstacles.

When our wordless awareness mind is apparent, we also experience a peaceful mind, objectivity and joy. The mass of mental defilements, old habits, fetters and underlying tendencies would then lie dormant. They need language to manifest themselves, and therefore when we live in a state of wordlessness they cannot arise and lie dormant deep in our mind. Over time they would lose their energy. Furthermore, when we live with our wordless awareness mind, beneficial biochemicals are secreted and have physiological effects that result in our addictions and infatuations being progressively eliminated. As a consequence, when we experience samādhi without inner talk and inner dialogue, the mass of mental defilements, old habits, fetters and underlying tendencies not only are isolated but are also progressively eliminated.

Mental defilements, old habits, fetters and underlying tendencies have a powerful energy that corrupts our mind. Therefore when we render them powerless and start to eliminate them, we change our karma. In reality, achieving good health is

already a sign of changed karma. Karma consists of speech karma, intention karma and bodily karma. When our mind is at peace, when we experience benevolence, compassion, empathetic joy and equanimity, everything that we think, say and do are all consistent with these qualities, and therefore we change our future karma.

We can practice the not naming technique any time, anywhere.

Not labeling objects

The aim of this practice is to achieve an objective mind. This is also called equanimity, which means that we know everything very clearly but do not get attached, and therefore the mind remains totally objective.

Labeling is attaching a name to objects based on our subjective opinion, thinking and feelings. This is the consciousness in action. Hidden in our consciousness are our prejudices, fixed opinions and biases. Labeling with both positive and negative biases leads us to generating speech, intention and bodily karma. Not labeling is not applying to objects any labels, such as right or wrong, evil or virtuous.

The practice consists of not having any inner talk when the senses come into contact with an object. We just keep our mind and senses pure when we make contact. If we give a label to the object, the language formation process immediately starts and our attachment to the object immediately follows. In contrast, when a person has a pure consciousness, the six senses do not affect the true mind and anything that the person perceives is free from labels.

Thirteenth century Song dynasty Zen Master Duy Tín describes as follows his meditation practice: "Before I started my practice, I saw mountains as mountains and rivers as rivers. When I received instructions from virtuous sages, I no longer saw mountains as mountains or rivers as rivers. Now that I have practiced for 30 years, I see mountains as mountains and rivers as rivers."

In the first stage, the master saw mountains and rivers through his worldly mind, which is through his thinking mind, intellect and consciousness, and therefore he saw mountains and rivers just like ordinary people do. In the second stage, he saw with an awakened intellect and understood that mountains and rivers are impermanent and do not have a reality that we can call their own. In the third stage, he saw mountains and rivers as-is, as-such, that is through his wordless cognitive awareness, and saw their true nature.

Worldly phenomena by themselves do not have a name. A name is something that people have invented. It varies depending on the individual, the group, the nation, the location, the point in time, and is a convention invented by people. When we use our senses to come into contact with an object, recognize it for what it is, without attaching a label to it, we recognize its true nature. In other words, when we dwell in our tathā-mind, we recognize the true nature of all worldly phenomena, which is their tathā-nature, or suchness nature.

The practice steps for the not-labeling-objects technique are as follows.

The first stage still involves language. When our senses come into contact with an object, we keep our mind objective and refrain from attaching any emotions to it. This step uses our awakened intellect and involves language.

In the second stage, we practice coming into contact with objects without any inner talk arising. We will then be in wordless awareness and will experience samādhi and paññā wisdom working in conjunction.

In the third stage, we dwell in a steady flow of wordless cognitive awareness and see the true nature of worldly phenomena.

