

# Clear Recognition (4 of 5) Comprehension of the Pasture

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

*sampajāna*, clear comprehension, *gocara*, cow, nourish, Four Foundations of Mindfulness, body, feeling tone, mind state, *dhmma*, wholesome, pleasant, unpleasant, beneficial, condition, food, aware, recognize, attention

Gil Fronsda

For today's talk on *sampajāna* (clear comprehension, clear recognition), I am happy to introduce the third form of clear comprehension: clear understanding and recognition of the pasture. "Pasture" is a strange expression, but it is my favorite of the clear comprehensions. Pasture is *gocara* in Pali. *Go* is the Pali word for cow. (*Go* and "cow" are probably cognates – Indo-European languages have the same source.) *Cara* means a location, field, or place. So, *gocara* – a place where cows go to eat – a pasture.

What feeds us? What nourishes us? What is the pasture or where is the nourishment that can come from anything we do?

In Buddhist practice, the pasture is specifically the Four Foundations of Mindfulness. The body is a pasture where we can get nourished and supported if we know how to bring attention to it. Attention to the feeling tones of experience, to the mind states, and to the *dhmmas* (mental activities) are all nourishment for us.

They are nourishment when we are aware of them in and of themselves – the body in the body, the feelings in the feelings, the mind states in the mind states, and the mental activities in the mental activities. This expression from the *suttas* means that we are aware through these four channels of direct experience – not through thinking. The proliferation of thoughts – ruminations, fantasies, complaining, anxiety-producing thoughts spinning around – is not nourishing. Even if our thoughts are wholesome, they might not be the place of greatest nourishment.

It is *how* we are aware that is important. We can discover this through the body. We can learn how to be aware of whatever is happening, through the channel of the body, in a way that feels wholesome. Then the body becomes a pasture. We can also become aware of this through the feeling tones – whether things are pleasant or unpleasant. Even with unpleasant things, there is a way of knowing them – a way of being present – that can be beneficial and nourishing.

If we are aware of something unpleasant and react to it – contracting around it, angry or despairing about it – this is not nourishing. But if we just feel the unpleasantness – the unpleasantness in unpleasantness, independent of our reactivity – oddly enough, those unpleasant things begin entering into a beneficial mode. They provide good conditioning – good food – for us because we are becoming free of them.

As soon as we are aware and clearly recognize the mind state that is present, that recognition is no longer caught up in the other pasture we could have walked in – the pasture of rumination, complaining, judgments, fear, anxiety, thoughts spinning and pushing us around.

Negative self-thinking is very harmful, but we should not push it away or be aversive to it. The magic of mindfulness practice is that we recognize negative self-thinking is there, but we do not feed there – we do not let it influence us. One way to do that is to know where the pasture is – clear comprehension of the pasture, of the good place to be. To be aware through the body, aware of feelings in feelings, to be aware without the channel of spinning thoughts.

At various times, one pasture is more beneficial than another. Sometimes the best pasture is the body, and we are aware, sense, and feel through the body. Sometimes it is best to recognize the feeling tones – the pleasantness, unpleasantness, and neutrality of the experience. Sometimes the best pasture is awareness of the mind state, the attitude, how awareness holds experience. Sometimes it is better to be aware of the

*dhammas* – the operating of the mind – the attachment, clinging, freedom, and other qualities of mind that are present.

So, to have clear comprehension of the pasture where we feed. For the Buddha, the best pastures are the Four Foundations of Mindfulness. Because it is so important, I will repeat: the best nourishment is found in *how* we are aware. We do not have to avoid paying attention to what is difficult. How we are aware of it – is the point. When we are aware of something difficult through the four foundations, doing this can be beneficial in nourishing the awareness rather than the negative states of mind and negative thinking. It is how we are aware that is nourishing.

With wholesome, beneficial states, there is a double benefit. How we are aware of the wholesome states is beneficial, and they themselves make good food. They themselves are good conditioning. It is a way of making room to be conditioned by the positive rather than the negative.

Clear comprehension of the pasture is practiced in the service of developing greater strength of mindfulness and stability of attention in the present moment on the way to becoming free. If we can become free in how we see – become free in how we are aware – our attention to others can become a gift. People can trust that when we are present with them, we are not imposing our agendas on them. We are there to see, be present, and share the common human experience of being alive in this challenging, wondrous world.

Thank you very much.