

Four Types of Clear Comprehension

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Or so. And I just finished yesterday teaching a week-long retreat through Zoom. It was an online retreat. Lovely to teach this and lovely to be part of it. The theme of the retreat was the topic of clear comprehension or clear recognition. I'd like to kind of follow, continue in that theme, since it's fresh on my mind and on my heart. It's an integral part of mindfulness practice.

In fact, sometimes the teachings of the Buddha, the word for mindfulness, *sati*, and the word for clear comprehension, clear recognition, *sampajañña*, are treated as a compound: *sati sampajañña*. They may all be part of the same; they're closely and intimately connected to each other. Our capacity to be mindful gives us or awakens or makes room for our capacity then to know what's happening. This ability to really know, not in some complicated way, but to really recognize what this is, what's happening—this is what is—is a kind of superpower. It's that valuable, it's that significant.

Once we can stop and clearly, we have to stop at once, we clearly recognize something, that makes room for it to register, for all kinds of other understandings to follow. There is less confusion. Sometimes there can be a clear kind of relaxation: Oh, now I understand what's happening. Oh, it's like that. The clear recognition of something then allows for sometimes the next step to occur, the next thing to happen. But if we're fuzzy, if we're not really clear what's there, then we can't build on that, or can't grow from that, or can't let it somehow register or be felt or be processed in some deep way.

The clearer we can know what we're feeling, what's happening with us, what the impact has been on world events for us in all kinds of ways, that clear reckoning, clear knowing, makes room for the heart to move on and open up and process in some way, and it's a great support for mindfulness practice. In fact, even in the teachings of the Buddha, the primary function

of clear recognition is in the practice of mindfulness, and to practise clear recognition of all aspects of our life as we go through it, so that we stay close to always kind of being cognizant, always being conscious of what we're doing as we're doing it. So for a Buddhist teaching, if you're walking, clearly know that you're walking. If you're standing, clearly know you're standing, and sitting down, clearly know you're sitting. It's so simplistic, this little instruction, that it can seem like, you know, I'm more sophisticated than that, I don't have to kind of slow down for anything, just to recognize that I'm standing or sitting, but to remain close enough in with awareness to really track and be conscious of what you're doing, what you're doing as you move your body, also what you're doing in your speech, or what you're doing just before you speak.

So you're conscious of what's coming as you start living a mindful life. But you also start living a life where you're more close to the place where you make choices about what to say, what to do, and to stay. That kind of close in and clearly recognize and be conscious. Living a conscious life is a clearly important part of Buddhist spirituality. Now, as the Buddhist tradition developed over the centuries, there developed an expansion of this idea of *sampajañña*, clearly recognizing, clearly knowing. That's where they listed four different things you can clearly know.

This is now a little bit stepping away from the clearly knowing breathing, or clearly knowing standing, or walking, or clearly knowing how we're feeling in the moment. It's a re, but it's an inner knowing of something. That's definitely part of human life, but it's a bit more higher order, and will be a little bit more involved than the simple moment experience that sometimes happens in mindfulness meditation. So these four kinds of clear things to clearly know something. We are able to clearly know, and clearly knowing it, we get so much benefit. And this is where it becomes a kind of superpower.

The first one is clearly knowing the purpose of what we're doing, clearly knowing the suitability, what's suitable to fulfill that purpose, clearly knowing how we get nourished from that—it's called the pasture, the place where the cows go and eat, goats are. How do we clearly know how we get nourished by engaging in the purpose, what we're doing? And then the fourth one is clear comprehension of non-delusion, clear comprehension how to go forward without the overlay of projections and bias and fantasies and stories that make the whole thing so much more complicated. These four, they can be practised as in the form of questions: What's the purpose of what you're doing right now? What's the purpose of why you're going to say what you're going to say? To ask that question repeatedly in all kinds of circumstances begins bringing clarity to what drives us.

What motivates us also gives us an opportunity to adjust the purpose that we might have. It's not a simple answer right away. Sometimes people who practice in some forms of Buddhism like to, you ask them, What's the purpose? And they don't like to get into a complicated purpose. They just like, Oh, you know, what purpose are you going for a walk? And, you know, like today, I went for a walk this morning, and someone could have stopped me, said, Why are you going for a walk?

I could have said, I'm walking just to walk. But that wasn't actually the case. I had another purpose in mind for the walk. The purpose was to begin thinking about this Dharma talk to give today. So the purpose was thinking, and then the talk, and so then what is a suitable way to walk? If that was what's in mind, well, when I think about my daily activities, I tend to walk, but slower than I would if I'm not doing something like that.

So I knew that I was now at a slower pace, and also not to spend a lot of time looking around and noticing a lot about the different things in my neighbourhood. Of course, walk and be attentive, but allow myself to kind of stay close to the kind of flow of thoughts about different ideas about, in this case, clear comprehension, and how to do it in a way that is nourishing. If I'm worried about the talk, or if I'm so pulled into the world of the thought and ideas, then I'm not nourished by it. But if I take my time, walk slow—I did walk slowly—and stay connected to my body as I walked, and to my kind of inner experience as I walked and as I thought about it, then there is a way in which that thinking kind of was in harmony with something within, and was actually very pleasant and enjoyable to do this. Then I wasn't deluded about what I was doing. I was very consciously aware of what I was doing.

I had chosen what I was going to do, and I was engaged in that choice, and it felt kind of the clarity and simplicity to what I was doing that I felt it also was kind of nourishing and satisfying. So that's going through. These four kinds of clear comprehension can be used in all kinds of circumstances in life. Sometimes we do something for one purpose, and if we reflect, What's the purpose of doing it?, we realize that actually there's a higher purpose we could do this for. If I realized, It's time for me to cook for my family, so the purpose is to cook for my family. That's nice.

But if I reflect and I ask myself the question, For what purpose are you cooking?, then I can say, Well, cooking for my family. But I'd like to offer food to my family that's nourishing for mind and body. I'd like to be able to offer it with love. Then I orient myself to the cooking in a different way than just to get the cooking over with so I can go on to other things. To live a purposeful life is actually one of the orientations for doing Buddhist practice in Buddhism. For doing Buddhist practice, there's many purposes for why people do it.

It helps to have a clarity of what that purpose is. If we're vague about doing Buddhist practice, if we're doing it because we have a general idea it's a good idea, we might still do it and might still benefit from it, but there isn't such clarity about how we engage, how to do it in a way that supports the purpose. There isn't a clarity to understanding the purpose and then prioritizing that with other purposes that we have. There are many good things to do in the world, but it's hard to do all of them. In fact, to spread ourselves thin, we don't do anything really well. For example, in the case of Buddhist practice, if this is a high enough priority in a person's life, and they know that, then they can easily, hopefully, organize their priorities in terms of what they most engage in.

For some people, Buddhist practice is the Dharma life, is the most central thing in their life, and so then it makes sense, if it's not central, to really give yourself over to it, give time for it, and not spend a lot of other time doing other things, and so you never get to the practice itself. This is not a requirement to do. This is not likely meant to be an obligation, but to ask ourselves the question, What is the purpose that I want to live my life for? What's the intention? What's the organizing principle I have? If there's clarity around that, then we can put ourselves behind it.

But then how do we put ourselves behind, and how do we engage in the purpose we do? For that, it's good to reflect on, to contemplate suitability, a clear comprehension of what's suitable. It could be that your dedication is to meditate every morning for an hour, but maybe we have new kids at home, and it simply is not possible to do that, and to keep trying to do it, and it just becomes frustrating and resent-making to do that. So this idea that the purpose of living a Buddhist life means you ought to meditate for an hour every day when the circumstance doesn't allow for it easily means it's not suitable to do it that way. Maybe what's suitable is to engage in the organic life of caring for kids by bringing in mindfulness to that, or bring in generosity, care, compassion to it, to really infuse activities you have to do with the practice rather than having the practice becoming separate. Or it might be that the way to practise, what is suitable for this body and mind.

Some people, some of us, have physical conditions, health issues or something that maybe we have to adjust how we practice. Sometimes we have a difficult life, and the difficult emotions that persist from that means that what's suitable to your mindfulness is to do it gently, very gently, with maybe a lot of self-compassion. Someone else who has a mind that drifts off into fantasy really easily and spends an inordinate amount of time developing the habit of fantasy, they don't need gentleness, maybe, and compassion, maybe. What they need is a certain definitiveness. And now I am going to practise, and for them maybe practising

definitely every hour, you know, for an hour, every day is really what they need in order to really begin breaking the habit of always being in fantasy. These are simple examples, but the idea is to take stock of our conditions and to begin appreciating what supports me, what's a helpful way for me.

In this way, we become our own teacher. Really, we need to become our own teacher. That's the direction we're going in this practice. Having a clear sense of purpose is part of this task. Then having the question, What is suitable and what's suitable given conditions around me? If, you know, again, if a neighbour has need, maybe it's not really suitable to practise freedom and compassion and presence by sitting in meditation, ignoring the neighbour.

Maybe it might actually be more undermining of practice to hold something at bay like that, just so I can take care of my own practice. Maybe the practice is supported more by letting go of my practice and caring for the neighbour. So what is suitable here? What is the question? The next thing is to consider, Where do I get nourished from this? Where is the pasture to?

The Buddha was very clear. He always had an answer for this. This may be a little bit of a surprise for some of you. The answer is in the four foundations of mindfulness. The answer is found in being mindful of our embodied experience, being mindful of the feeling tones, the feelings of experience, being mindful of the mind states we have, the feelings, the attitudes we have, and being mindful of the inner mental processes that are operating in relationship to our experience. What this does is that it brings our attention close in.

This is where the idea of being grounded and rooted here in our direct experience and realizing, Here is where we get nourished. Sometimes we want other people to make us happy, other people to provide us with what we need. Other situations, experiences, and they certainly can be supportive and helpful and wonderful sometimes. But to depend on the external world, to depend on certain kinds of stimuli—alcohol, drugs, food—in order to kind of feel spiritually nourished is kind of a dead end. The remarkable thing is that if we practise mindfulness to stay close in to our experience, our mindful experience is generative of a sense of nourishment, a sense of well-being. That's where we find our centredness or peace, or happiness, even.

So the very system that gets nourished is a system that generates the nourishment. This is a remarkable kind of system where, through mindfulness, this very psychophysical system that we are part of generates the sense of well-being that nourishes the system itself. So it's self-generating in a certain way as opposed to again needing something outside. The clear comprehension of the nourishment of the pasture in the Buddhist teaching is to stay close to mindfulness. Stay grounded here. Don't lose yourself.

Stay conscious of your lived experience as you go about doing what you're doing so you can stay, so then you can. One thing you can notice when you get stressed, when you get exhausted, when you get tired. Then you don't just keep pushing yourself that way. But you also can recognize that not only by avoiding stress, but by being relaxed in what you do, there is a deeper inner well-being that can come as well. Then the clear recognition of non-delusion. Some people think it's a little hard to recognize delusion, non-delusion.

But when we stay close to the four foundations of mindfulness, when we stay close to our experience in our some degree of calm or subtleness, then, Oh, when the mindfulness is strong, we can watch the arising of thoughts. Most delusions are ideas or thoughts that are created by the mind. If we stay close enough to watch thoughts arise, watch ideas and projections arise, then we can start seeing, Oh, it's not inherent in the situation that this is how it is. It is just the way I'm seeing it, this way I'm interpreting it. Sometimes with that ability, we can see clearly there's a fantasy, clearly deluded here. I've had the same idea a thousand times, and it's never proved to be true.

So maybe I should stop thinking it. But to watch thoughts arise, and have the mindfulness to see it. Then it's the watching, the mindfulness itself, which is the non-delusion. To begin appreciating that there is a place of clarity, of witnessing that in and of itself sees clearly. In that clarity, it's not prior to the filters through which we see. That's where non-delusion is.

That's a place that's very close to non-clinging, non-reactivity. To learn this place of non-delusion and have that support us. It's very closely related to this idea that this whole enterprise begins with of clear recognition, clear knowing. Clear knowing has a lot to do with clarity, simplicity. Not all these layers and valleys of ideas and interpretation. To learn this idea, to relax and soften and quiet, and to see the simplicity of the moment, allows us then to have clear comprehension.

Some of this clear comprehension is very simple. These four different categories, and some of it comes from a contemplative life, a life of being reflective and thoughtful, and a Buddhist life. Buddhist spirituality is not just a life of mindful attention to the moment, what's going on. It's also a life where we spend time, quality time, thinking about our life, reflecting about our life, reflecting about purpose of particular things we do, reflecting on the purpose of our life itself. Why do we do it? What do we want to dedicate our life to?

What's most important for us today, this week, this year, this lifetime? To spend time staying close and reflective in a calm, relaxed, contemplative kind of spiritual way to reflect about suitability. What's the most useful way to accomplish this purpose given the causes and conditions around me? How do I approach this? How do I do this so I am nourished by it? When

we're nourished by it, then we're able also to support other people better.

We actually have more resources within to live for the benefit and welfare of others if we are nourished. And then now to practise non-delusion? Where is the delusion? Where is the non-delusion? Where are the projections? Where are the goals? Where are the expectations? What are the associations I have I bring with me from the past that may be clouding the water? To really kind of look and see what's happening here.

A life of contemplative reflection about—and these are four things that are useful to contemplate. One of things you could do is, you know, you can journal about it. You can go for walks and think about these things. Figure out where you can have quality time. For some people, this quality reflection can happen in conversation with friends, talking about purpose, exploring it, discussing it and suitability and all this. It is a kind of superpower, because once you are clear about purpose and you really have, you know, This is really what you want to do, then you can organize other things, organize your life, yourself.

Yet this is what I'm going to do it wholeheartedly. Even if it's just cooking a meal, if that's the purpose and you purpose to do it, then do it in a suitable, supportive way, to do it in the way that's nourishing. Maybe you want to give yourself over to just cooking when you're cooking, and for the purpose that you have. Or maybe it's for what's really important for your life energy, what you want to do with your life to make it a priority. To really know what that is and get behind it is a superpower. So much can be done behind a clear sense of purpose.

So thank you very much, and may you this next week reflect a little bit on the value of clear comprehension.