

Clear Comprehension of Purpose

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So I'll continue in the topic of clear comprehension, and the topic today will be clear comprehension of purpose.

And I'll start with kind of a metaphor, a story that I read about 30 years ago in a running magazine. And it was about an ultramarathon they have, I don't know if it's every year, but in Colorado. An ultramarathon is a 100-mile race in the mountains of Colorado. And it's a pretty grueling race. They hike up to 12,000, I mean, they run, and this is running, 12,000 feet. Not all of it, but at least part of it.

And what was unusual about this particular race was that two of the competitors came from the Tarahumara area in the mountains of Mexico. And they were 55 and 60 years old at the time. You know, that was a little bit interesting at this, you know, that alone. But they ran in homemade sandals, you know, with leather straps. And what was really amazing was that they ran in a very even pace, kind of smiling a lot of the time, not appearing exhausted ever, even when the altitude reached the 12,000 feet. They just kept their pace.

The one Herrera, the 55-year-old, won the race, finishing in about 20 hours. So you can imagine a hundred miles, you know, that's five-bent of miles going in that kind of terrain. And he was later interviewed. You know, he didn't speak really great English, you know, so they didn't really, you know, know some of the subtle things that were going on. And he said, if I had known I was racing, I would have gone faster.

So the reason I bring that up is that, you know, it really intrigued me to learn more about the Tarahumara people. And they're known for running extraordinary distances. They grow up this way. You know, they're running from village to village, and they do it in groups. And they have a game they play.

And it's called Raruchipari, where two teams run long distances along these mountain trails. And some of the distances are up to 50 miles. And they run in a group kicking a small wooden ball towards the distance, towards whatever destination they're going. And, um, and, you know, when somebody gets tired, somebody in their team takes over. And it's this really cooperative game. And although the game is competitive in structure, it's deeply communal in spirit.

The emphasis is on teamwork and shared experience rather than winning. And, you know, they run a football for hours, sometimes all day, sometimes through the night. You know, from the outside, it looks like a race, right? But it's more of a shared journey. And the purpose of the game is not to win, but to share the running with each other. The running becomes like a rhythm, a shared endurance, a shared direction.

And in some ways, meditation practice is like this, you know, we're moving along a long trail. You know, we often think that the purpose is to get somewhere. I'm going to get calm. I'm going to really get calm this sitting. I'm going to get insight. My restlessness is going to go away. I'm going to have a good sit, you know.

And we often have these purposes that we think that that's what it's about. We get confused. But the purpose can be more like a long run with long stretches with the paths uneven. And sometimes we feel strong. Sometimes we feel tired. Sometimes the mind is clear, sometimes it's confused.

Clear comprehension of purpose is what keeps us going. You're not pushing for the finish line, but remembering what we're practicing. We're practicing to understand our experience, to learn how we create suffering and how to let go of it. It's like gently kicking the ball forward, moment after moment, staying in the direction of freedom. Staying in rhythm with the path, staying in harmony with the present.

Meditation isn't a sprint towards a result. It's more like relaxing into a long run through the changing terrain. Purpose gives us direction to our practice. You know, so often we forget we're practicing to be free and we think we're practicing to have certain experiences. The point is to be free with whatever is here now, even if now isn't what we want.

So wise mindfulness includes the receptive quality of simple awareness. Clear comprehension illuminates what mindfulness knows. It's like shining a light on the moment. It has a sharper, fuller seeing of things as they are. And I know some of you have heard this story I told before.

Some years back, I was standing outside the Young Museum in San Francisco with two friends,

and there's a pond there with a small island in the middle. And two of us were quietly admiring the two large turtles resting on the island. But after a couple of minutes, our third friend said, they're not real. They're sculptures. And at first we strongly disagreed and argued, they looked real to us, but he was so certain that he convinced us until one of the turtles jumped into the water.

And, you know, so in a similar way, you know, we pay attention to the moment without really seeing what's going on. Our beliefs or ideas about it, it's real, it's not real, those ideas really get in the way of just paying attention with what's there. We're not distracted by the shadow in the mind, by all the different ideas and beliefs we may have. What's actually here can just reveal itself more fully.

So clear comprehension can be just a simple recognition, a phenomena. You know, you might hear a sound. That's all there is to it. You know, that's pressure, that's warm. But at different times, it might include a broader situational awareness, a context, a discernment.

You know, we might, for instance, we might be meditating peacefully, listening to repetitive sound for quite a while. And then at some point, you know, the mind gets more clear and recognizes it as rain. And if that's ever happened to you, that's been, you know, really interesting to me in meditation sometimes. And from that understanding, you know, it's raining, a wise response can follow. Maybe I should close the window, you know, and that's actually, I've done that.

So clear comprehension doesn't complicate experience. It clarifies it. It allows us to see what's actually here and to respond with more wisdom. So clear comprehension of purpose is... Purpose can be understood as reason for an action. Okay, why would we do something?

It's recognizing clearly and directly what that reason is. And an example is we can do the very same actions with very different purposes. For example, we might go to the store to buy food for dinner. We might go quickly and efficiently, just trying to get it done. Another task to check off the list.

Or we might go with the awareness that we're gathering food to nourish a friend or a family. With those two different ways of shopping, we might end up buying the same food exactly, but the quality of the heart can be quite different. You know, the actions are almost identical. We might even buy the same exact food, but inwardly is where it matters. We might understand, notice the sense of warmth and quiet happiness when our intention is to nourish others. Or we might notice a tension and pressure when the intention is just to get it over

with.

Another example from my own practice, you know, in my early years, I began to notice how much time I spent grading myself in meditation. School trained me well, you know. That was good. I blew it. I spaced out. I moved too much.

You know, there's just this constant inner critic, you know, and occasionally it would give me some kudos. You know, and in a way I was being mindful. I could see, you know, I'd see clearly that I'd been lost in thought for 50 minutes. But something important was missing. I lost touch with a deeper purpose of the practice, to be at ease, to be at peace, to be happy.

I didn't yet understand how essential it is to see or experience through eyes of kindness. Instead, I was training something else. I was strengthening the judgmental mind rather than cultivating a heart that's free and caring. And this is where clear comprehension becomes so important. It helps us recognize these differences.

We get to see which qualities actually lead towards freedom and which ones actually tighten the heart. And as we do that, we begin to release those habits of judging, of striving, of struggling against what's here, and to cultivate a heart that's patient, kind, and at ease with experience. As we practice, there's a shift that begins to happen. A shift from habit to training.

So with that clear comprehension, you know, the practice tends to follow a very familiar pattern. You know, we're trying to feel good. You know, how do I feel better? How do I do that? You know, we try to control what's happening. We try to succeed. We try to avoid failing.

With clear comprehension of purpose, something changes. The meditation is no longer about getting a particular experience. It becomes a training of the mind, a training of the heart, when the purpose is not to have a good meditation, but to cultivate a liberated relationship with whatever experience arises. We have many purposes in a human life. One way of thinking of them is as long-term purposes, short-term purposes.

In daily life, we might have a long-term purpose, such as getting an education, raising a family, learning a skill. It's this larger sense of purpose that keeps us going to school each day, even when we don't feel like it. That keeps us going to work each day, even when we don't feel like it. If we want to run a marathon, for instance, it's the vision of the goal that keeps us running day after day, month after month. And a short-term purpose might be to just run today. You know, today's enough. And they're both necessary.

And this can also apply to our spiritual life. The long-term purposes are what inspire practice. You know, we might, when we look within us, you know, we might feel drawn to the possibility of freedom, or very simply of living without struggle, without resistance, you know, by a heart

that's loving, compassionate and at ease. All those things, different flavors of that can be our deep inspiration, some level of wanting peace, wanting love, wanting, you know, wanting freedom of the heart, freedom from struggle.

But this long-term purpose isn't something far away. It can come alive right here. And it's actually the only time it can come alive. It's right here. If our intention is freedom, we can practice letting go on this breath.

You know, take a moment and really consider, you know, like right at this moment sitting here, you know, is there any part of you that has resistance, is leaning forward? You know, can you practice letting go on this breath, this moment? You know, if part of our purpose is compassion, you know, then when difficulty arises and, you know, we can meet difficulty with kindness.

I can't imagine that there's anyone in this retreat who hasn't met some difficulty in this retreat. And maybe there is, you know, but usually, you know, when I ask, nobody raises their hand. You know, the aspiration, if, you know, if the path, the path is, is an idea, an inspiration, and the practice is here. And, you know, the way that I see it in my own heart is, in my own mind, it's like, you know, I'm looking to climb a mountain, you know, and I want to get to the top.

But if my trip going up the mountain, my hike up the mountain is, am I there yet? Am I there yet? The entire journey isn't fun. It doesn't feel good. And, you know, when we get there, you know, maybe we appreciate the vista, you know, maybe we have a sense of accomplishment, but there's a way that it doesn't really live up to its expectations. You know, now you get to go down, you know.

But when our long-term purpose is, you know, we want to get up the top of the mountain, but we want to do it in a way that's enjoyable and that we appreciate every moment, we appreciate the sky, the birds, the little animals, other creatures we might see, the feeling of our feet on the ground, you know, so all of that becomes the journey is a journey of freedom. So the path is never elsewhere. It's not in the future. It's all in how we relate to this very moment.

And there's a lot of purposes we can have, you know, as I mentioned, like our highest aspirations, they're kind of like the umbrella of what colors the practice. And we can have these what I call midterm purposes that support it, you know, such as speaking wisely, you know, not gossiping, meditating regularly, you know, refraining from speaking with anger. There's all these different midterm purposes we can have that keep supporting us in our long-term

aspiration.

In the short term of the meditation period, we might aspire simply to stay with the breath, but to stay peacefully connected with each breath. You know, how does that look when the breath feels uncomfortable, the breath feels awkward? And if any of you have had a little bit of that this retreat where the breath just isn't the way we like it, you know, and are we staying peacefully connected with it even if it's unpleasant, even if the body feels unpleasant?

So it's important to see clearly these subtle helpful and unhelpful habits that color our practice. I've spent hours with the breath and doing it entirely with an unhelpful attitude, you know, and it only reinforces those qualities. You know, I'm going to do it whether it kills me. It's very different than the Buddha's aspiration to sit there till he got awakened, you know, which was something that came out of love and joy in his heart.

You know, and these three purposes can support each other. You know, when our purposes are aligned, there tends to be resonance and ease. When they're not aligned, there tends to be a sense of dissonance. We know something is off. We might contract with effort. We get overly serious, critical, judgmental.

You know, an example, you know, is like we may have the wish to connect with, this is in daily life, you know, we want to connect with someone. You know, and talking can be a beautiful way to communicate with another human being. But if a disagreement arises, we might get caught in an argument and lose touch with that original intention. The purpose shifting from connecting to winning the argument.

You know, attachment to our view takes over. You know, we no longer want to connect with them. We just want to be right. You know, in my own experience, you know, the emotional response can be similar to the tantrum of a child, you know, just dressed up to appear a little more sophisticated when we do it as adults. You know, seeing this clearly without judgment is what allows it to soften.

We can let go, but only when we're not in conflict with what's here. So when what shows up in us is immature, you know, get really, you know, pissed at someone for something that's not that big a deal, you know, you know, then I go, that's what I was upset about. You know, I often reflect on that, you know, when I contract about something, is that's what I was upset about, you know, that they didn't leave the toilet paper where it should have been. Yeah.

You know, so when we see these parts of ourselves that aren't quite mature, that aren't developed the way we like them, you know, are we in conflict with them? Or can we actually just be interested in them? Oh, this part is a hurt part of ourselves. It's a, you know, it's a

wound. It's a clinging. This is why we practice, because we're not free.

And when we can, you know, if we meet these parts of ourselves with kindness, you know, the practice begins to include everything, every part of who we are, every part, every shadow that we have needs to be included. You know, freedom happens even when we're, can happen, even when we're very caught in a lot of struggle and pain.

You know, in meditation, you know, sometimes with these ideas, you know, about the four kinds of clear comprehension, you know, they can, you know, kind of make you think there's a lot of to-do, you know. You know, it's not about spending time thinking about it, but as our mind slows down, if we allow ourselves over and over again to actually just see what's here, however it is, to see it without pushing it away, without grabbing it, then our intentions naturally stand out in clear relief. We see clearly when we're adding something unhelpful to the simplicity of the moment.

Our long-term purpose can be just a quiet inner orientation that guides our practice. And when we're not aligned, we feel it, we feel it. Are you aligned right now? You know, do you feel, are you wholehearted in your practice right now? You know, it takes a lot of sincerity to look at those parts of ourselves. You know, no, right now I just want to get calm. I'll get free later, you know.

I mean, I've basically done the equivalent of that at times. In my early retreats, you know, on the day of my practice discussions with the teacher, you know, I would double down on my efforts so I could report a significant experience, you know, and so my teacher would think well of me. That was my purpose, you know, and I would like get up extra early and do a couple of extra sits and, you know, and really work hard at concentrating so I could report something really cool.

You know, it took me a while to see the foolishness of that. Sometimes I'm slow, you know, how it was really at odds with my intention to be free. You know, the desire to be liked, to be admired, or what is some equivalent of that can really run us in our lives. It's so painful.

So, you know, when I started to see this clearly, the desire to impress a teacher, it didn't go right away, didn't leave right away. But something inside me realigned in myself to something more helpful and including holding that part of me, you know, please like me, please think I'm great, you know, with compassion, with kindness and, you know, and for me ultimately with humor, you know, and just to see it in myself eventually became funny, you know, and then it weakened and weakened.

Our capacity to stay on purpose, to remember our purpose, to stay motivated, it develops

much the same way as our capacity to keep our attention on the breath. You know, it's easy to feel motivated when the practice is enjoyable and everything's going well, you know, but, you know, strong suffering can also energize practice. And I know people who've really rededicated themselves after major loss or a difficult diagnosis.

You know, I had a friend who got really, really sick, you know, and got a terminal diagnosis, a young man. And he got really deeply into practice at that point. And he said, you know, I'm really thankful for this disease, you know, which was like really a surprise to hear that. He said, you know, my life, I was just, you know, constantly struggling and striving. You know, I've allowed myself to really connect with people now. I've allowed myself to connect with myself. My life is, I'm so much happier right now.

You know, and, you know, so it was like, you know, yeah, I mean, it was very inspiring to me to see that, to see that. But on the other hand, you know, like I found there was one of my students had a really severe dental problem. And what happened, the dentist drilled in the wrong spot and hit a nerve, which gave him constant pain for like a year and a half. And he became my best student ever. He practiced so diligently and got so much out of the practice because he...

You know, the choice was either to be constantly in pain, you know, resisting it, or try something new. And he did. He did it full-heartedly. But it was interesting when at some point the nerve healed. It takes about a year and a half or two years to heal. And when it finally healed and the pain went away completely, his desire to practice got really weak. You know, oh yeah, I'll skip today.

Because his motivation was all about, you know, getting out of that suffering, that particular suffering. So, you know, have to kind of dig, dig deep and reorient, reorient ourselves at those times.

You know, the mind forms habits, you know, all of us, you know, all or any unhappiness we have is about the habits of mind. They're no different in a lot of ways than, you know, you know, have you all had a habit you didn't like, like biting your nails or different kind of, you know, habits of, you know, eating really late at night and, you know, making yourself sick right before bed? You know, people have all these different habits they do that they know aren't so helpful.

The more we repeat something, the easier it is to do it. You know, we actually have these grooves in the brain, and every time we do something, it makes them deeper, deeper. I mean, that's how we learn anything. You know, it works both ways. You know, you want to learn how

to do a skill, and you repeat, repeat, repeat, till it's really easy. You know, and that creates this groove in the mind. But same thing with all our bad habits. You know, they over and over and over again, you know, we judgmental, creates this groove.

And but, you know, the wonderful thing is what we call, you know, we call neuroplasticity. The mind is plastic. I mean, not, you know, now it's literally plastic, but let's not go there. But it's, you know, it can change. It can be reconditioned.

You know, and but that's why sometimes, you know, the practice can feel like going against the current because it goes against the momentum of our deepest conditioning, our deepest condition. Let me get out of discomfort. Let me get what I want. I want, go away. I want, go away. That's our deepest conditioning, you know, and the pushing and pulling, you know, to get exactly what we want. Yeah.

So really appreciating, you know, appreciating the power of that, how deep that is in us, and how the practice helps us soften around it, helps that soften and get easier and looser. And, you know, one of my favorite definitions for one who's awakened, who's enlightened, is the unconditioned. You know, I find that really, you know, it's not so mystical. It's just, oh yeah, you know, stop biting your nails, you know. I stop criticizing myself. I stop criticizing others. You know, I stop protecting myself. Yeah.

So as we sit, you know, as we sit, you know, we may begin a sitting with the intention to stay present and open. And yet within minutes, the mind's wandered far away. And, you know, on retreat, you know, as we keep returning again and again to this present, the mind then gradually settles. You know, and then we begin to notice, you know, what takes us away? You know, what, you know, that's when we slow down enough to see what took us away, what's taking us away.

You know, for instance, you know, my favorite fantasies always on retreat were creative fantasies. Oh, I'm going to do this project or that project. You know, that to me was always the most entertaining fantasies. And, you know, when I started really slowing down and looking, you know, what was happening that I kept going to these fantasies and spending, you know, I mean, you know, on long retreat, I've spent hours doing this kind of stuff, you know, and, you know, in short retreats, there's a little more commitment in a way, you know, because you don't have day after day after day.

But I noticed that my mind would get bored, you know, it would just be bored. There wasn't much happening. The breath was there. Yeah, it just seemed a little, you know, and I didn't like it, but I didn't notice it. You know, I didn't notice that aversion was present, you know,

restlessness was present. That was just, I didn't want to be there, you know, it's boring, you know, and instead of turning towards it, and exploring what's boredom really like?

What is this state? You know, what is this being unpleasant? Can I hang with it? Can I allow myself to feel it in the body? Can I allow myself to really get to know it? You know, my mind would just escape from it. I don't want this, and it would go into something more fun.

So little by little, if we, instead of going on these fantasies, if we actually meet what's here, regardless of what it is, you know, we increase our capacity to meet them each time they arise. It gets easier and easier to meet the difficult, the more we do it. You know, if an unpleasant experience brings aversion, we turn towards it rather than push it away. You know, and, you know, might say similar to what Shelley said, you know, this is what aversion is like. You know, this is what aversion feels like.

If we rush too quickly back to the breath, we miss the opportunity to develop a wiser relationship to what's difficult. You know, so being really patient with this, you know, allowing ourselves to see it. As the mind gets steadier, we discover we can meet discomfort without resisting it, you know, and that's, you know, that becomes a really beautiful thing when you can meet discomfort, things we don't like, without any pushback, without any resistance. There's so much freedom in that, without having the mind have to be any certain way.

This ability to stay with difficulty is one of the great supports for remaining on purpose and for the practice to grow. You know, those of you who've been practicing for a long time, you know, may recognize both sides of the practice. You know, the times when we just feel so alive and inspired, and the times when the practice feels like we're slogging through mud or walking through thick fog. You know, so the invitation is to include both.

You know, can we slog through the mud with a peaceful heart? Can we walk through the fog with kindness? You know, sometimes all we can offer is the quiet, even tentative, yes, this too. This too I can be with. Now, the practice includes turning towards difficulty without being in conflict with it.

As we develop the capacity to meet our own suffering and the suffering of others, something beautiful happens. The greater capacity to meet pain, the greater capacity for joy and peace. And we can recognize that too. Ah, this is what joy feels like. Yes, this is peace.

So I'd like to end with a very short teaching, three lines, from Lao Tzu. An ancient Chinese sage, I think from the 6th century, the author of the *Tao Te Ching*. It's a text that's guided contemplative practice for over 2,000 years.

So he asked, do you have the patience to wait until your mud settles and the water is clear? Do you have the patience to wait until your mud settles and the water is clear?

So let's give ourselves that patience. Let's allow this retreat to unfold one moment at a time. So let's share a minute of silence.