

Seeing Clearly

Dharma talk by Diana Clark

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This type of practice that we do here at IMC, the Insight Meditation Center, is sometimes called Vipassanā^[1]. There are a few different ways we can translate that term, but one way is "clear seeing," which then gets interpreted as insight. Clear seeing.

This got me curious about this whole notion of seeing, which shows up again and again in the suttas^[2] in a number of different ways. There's a way in which we can understand our practice to be so much about seeing.

Even in English, this word "seeing" has so many different meanings. The obvious one is just to see a visual object with the eyes. But we also have this idea of a romantic relationship: "Oh yeah, they've been seeing each other for a few months now." Or maybe a salesperson might say, "Can't you just see yourself in this car?"—to envision or imagine something that is just in the mind. Or maybe it's about understanding or comprehension: "Oh, I see."

Just like in English, we see this in the Pali^[3], in the way insight or seeing is talked about in the early teachings. The Buddhist teachings have a lot to say about just this very simple act of seeing, but I'm not going to talk too much about that. Just this idea that there are objects out there, there are eyeballs and minds in here, and the two come together, and seeing happens. Not too complicated. Well, maybe it is quite complicated, but in some way we could just think of it as something simple.

What's a little bit more interesting is this idea of the roles that our minds have in what we expect to be a very simple process of just seeing—this yellow tape here, for example. Our minds aren't like cameras. They aren't accurately seeing and capturing things, even though we often think that they are. We often believe that what we are seeing is just the way that it is. But have you ever noticed that if you see a photograph of yourself, you think, "Wait, do I look like that?" What we see in the mirror doesn't quite match what we see in a photograph. That's just the way that it is.

I had an experience not too long ago where I was at a beach and found this shell that was really interesting. I picked it up and looked at it, thinking, "Wow, look at this. I wonder what kind of creature this is associated with." I continued walking on the beach, and then boom—those shells were everywhere. I noticed that they had always been there; I just hadn't seen them. But when I saw the first one, then all of a sudden I could see them more.

This is a well-established phenomenon. When we start to see something, the mind starts to incline towards what is familiar. We might even start to think, "Wow, there are so many of these." But the amount of them hasn't changed at all; we're just starting to notice. Advertisers count on us having this experience. We often have the thought, "I think I'm going to buy a new car." Then all of a sudden, the cars you're thinking about buying are the ones on the road with you. It's not that those types of cars are just now on the road; you're just now noticing them.

I'm pointing to this idea that what the mind sees, or what we're actually seeing, is selective. I will add to that: we are adding interpretations on top of this so often.

Before I get there, I'd like to share a poem. I'm in a phase of reading a lot of poems these days. I'm sure I'll get out of it, but this is the poem phase right now. This is a poem by Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer, and it's called "Insight":

I'm not sure I could say they are beautiful, these brittle, brown cinquefoil stems trembling in the wind. Though part of me longs to find beauty everywhere. Ah, the longing to see beauty shapes the way I meet the world. There, seeing this truth, beautiful as a golden flower.

I'll read it again.

I'm not sure I could say they are beautiful, these brittle, brown cinquefoil stems trembling in the wind. Though part of me longs to find beauty everywhere. Ah, the longing to see beauty shapes the way I meet the world. There, seeing this truth, beautiful as a golden flower.

There are a number of things happening in this poem. It is actually doing a lot of work for us. I love that she titles it "Insight." First, she's just seeing these cinquefoil stems. These are plants that, at certain times of the year, lose their leaves and look just like sticks sticking in the ground. She's saying these aren't so beautiful. There is this disappointment in seeing these stick-like plants, but then she notices, "Oh yeah, I want to see things that are beautiful." We have this preference. We are looking for things that are aesthetically pleasing and bring some delight, things that are nice to see. Why not?

When we're looking for things that are beautiful, we start to see things that are not beautiful. We have a little bit of a checklist: Is this beautiful? No. Is this beautiful? Yep. Is that beautiful? Well, it could be beautiful if I just changed this thing over here and moved that around over there.

We're setting up this evaluation, and we're not so much meeting things as they are. Instead, we're evaluating, judging, and comparing based on some idea that we have in our mind: "Going out for a walk, I should see beautiful things," for example.

She's noticing how this comparison or judging is showing up, and then she's noticing that she noticed. She's saying, "Oh, there, seeing this truth, beautiful as a golden flower." Just seeing

how the mind operates and how it influences what we are seeing with our eyes—recognizing that is beautiful. This greater understanding is seeing that the mind is not like a camera. Instead, there's seeing that happens with the eyes, and then there are things that get added: evaluation, judgment, liking, and not liking.

The mind is not neutral. It longs, it fears. It searches and it leans towards some things and away from other things. This leaning shapes what appears in our visual field. Understanding the lenses through which we are seeing the world is so helpful. She recognizes this in the poem, because recognizing some of the lenses that we're using might undermine some of the authority that we give to our notions about the world. Notions about the way things should be, what's good and what's bad, what's desirable, what's undesirable.

A big part of mindfulness practice, part of insight practice, is learning to notice what is being seen and what is being added by the mind. The longing, the fear, the habit, the hope—all these things get added by the mind. Of course, the mind is doing that; we don't have to make it wrong. The point is that we are taking this as the truth, like this is the only way it is. Whether a thing is good or bad or beautiful or not beautiful, we think that is somehow inherent in the object. It's not inherent in the object. It's something that the mind is adding.

We all know this with food. We might have some food like Brussels sprouts and say, "No, thank you." I actually like Brussels sprouts, but I know it's something not everybody does. We might think, "Brussels sprouts, ick." We think they're inherently icky. But of course they're not, because some people like them. It's true about everything. The ickiness, the desirability, the liking, the not liking—is not in the object. It's in the mind.

Seeing that and understanding that again and again is so helpful. It can be life-changing and transformative, because our minds make stories based on what they're seeing. Sometimes these stories are helpful, and sometimes they're not. For example, if I need to remember to bring something somewhere, I will often put it near the door. When I'm walking out the door, I see it, and the mind makes a story: "Oh yeah, that's the thing I need to bring." This is helpful.

But maybe, in the same way, there's a pile of papers on my desk. The mind could just be like, "Oh, I'm such a slob. My life is a mess. When am I going to get it together?" Or, "What's wrong with me? Why is my desk always messy? I hope nobody sees my messy desk." We just see something—it's just papers on a desk. And yet this whole story gets added on to it.

If this isn't seen clearly, we can just start to believe that our life is a mess or that we are a disaster. This inner dialogue, this way in which we are interpreting what we're seeing with the eyes, creates the conditions for this big, long story about us. And maybe that story is not one that's helpful.

Or maybe we see someone outside out for a run. The mind goes into comparison: "Yeah, I used to run. I should run. My life is too busy, or I don't have time anymore." The inner critic gets activated. It's just seeing somebody running. That's all it is. Seeing somebody run could also be: "Wow, just the joy of running. The delight of moving the body is such a beautiful thing. I remember when I used to do that. It's great." Often, the inner critic gets activated instead.

So it's not that what we see is the source of suffering—a messy desk, a person jogging, food we don't like. It's what the mind does with it. It's what the mind makes it mean.

Part of this practice is to really help us see the way the mind is judging, comparing, evaluating, or telling a story. When we recognize, "Oh, this is something that got added on by the mind; it's just a person jogging, it's just a stack of paper," we can see that there's definitely more space. There's room for something different to unfold, instead of the usual progression of the mind beating itself up. Maybe instead the tension broadens, and the grip loosens on the story about oneself being a messy person or a lazy person.

If we can start to see that, we're less entangled in the story. The thoughts have less authority. It doesn't mean that the thoughts stop arising. They still arise, but they don't seem like the reality and the whole truth. This is one way freedom begins. Not because what we see is different, but because we begin to see more clearly, including what the mind is adding.

We might say that there's seeing objects, there's seeing what the mind adds, and then there's a seeing *through* something. With this practice, when we start to see what the mind is adding, we still see what is there, but we're starting to see the mind meeting the object.

Let's use this little example. Let's say someone speaks sharply. Usually, the mind moves very quickly and makes an evaluation: "Oh, that person is rude." Then there's a feeling of hurt, either for ourselves if the person was speaking to us, or for the other person. All of a sudden, there's a sense of, "Okay, this is a problem and it has to be fixed."

But with mindfulness, we can start to see: "Oh, there was hearing that happened. And then there was this tightness and sense of hurt, and maybe a sense of defensiveness arose. And then there's this urge to respond." Now we're seeing something more. Not just what happened, but how the experience is being interpreted as a problem where something must be done. We often find ourselves doing things out of this reactivity, just being pushed to do something, not even being aware of the push that's there.

When we're caught in the story, we feel this is a problem that has to be fixed. I'm not saying that people speaking sharply is perfectly fine and we should allow people to do whatever they want. I'm saying that when we start to see this process, it opens up the possibility that something else can happen—that there can be a different response.

When we're caught in the story, we tend to take things as solid and personal. It means something about us, and it's the whole truth. But when the process becomes more visible, there's more space. Hurt can be known as hurt, anger can be known as anger, and the urge to react can be known as the urge to react. Then we're not quite so tangled up in it and bound by it. The pain may still be there. The discomfort of those sharp words may still be there. They're not going away, but there's less suffering added on top of it. It's just like, "Ouch, that hurt." There isn't that immediate wish to retaliate or do something that might not be wise.

Then we'll start to see something else. We start to see that actually, this too is changing. The sound of those sharp words is gone. The tightening has shifted, and the hurt isn't being experienced exactly the same. Maybe it's diminished, maybe it's gotten worse, or maybe it feels less like a tightening and more like a stabbing in the chest. What seems so solid doesn't seem so solid anymore if we're able to stay with the experience. Whereas before, we were just bouncing off of it, feeling like we didn't have a choice but to react.

With insight, we can start to see: "Oh yeah, this is a whole process. It's a whole cascade of events, and these events are moving and changing." It's not one very specific, encased experience. It's things that are flowing, and we're responding to them. What seemed so personal can actually be seen as just part of a process. This person said this because of some of their conditioning. I don't like it because of some of my conditioning. Things aren't extracted from the conditions of the world. It's just happening because all these other things are happening. It couldn't be otherwise.

What seemed like the whole truth starts to look like, "Oh, that was just a moment, and now that moment is different." This moment is this moment.

Part of practice is learning to notice the difference between what is seen and what is added. At first, we notice the object. Then we start to notice what the mind is adding: the judgment, the evaluation, the wanting, the resistance, the story-making. Sometimes we begin to see that even these are just passing processes.

This is where something loosens. The sense that things are inevitably going towards more difficulty opens up to: "Oh, there can be more and more freedom here." There can be a sense of things moving differently. Instead of inevitably responding to someone speaking sharply by being in a bad mood and sending a curt message back, something else is possible.

We have difficulties not only from what experiences arise, but because we don't always notice how much the mind is shaping what we're seeing. When the mind's shaping becomes visible, there can be less reactivity, less entanglement, and more freedom. That's insight. To see what's being added, and to see how things aren't as solid as we think they are.

With that, I'll close and open it up. See if there are questions or comments. Thank you.

Q&A

Question: Is it ever possible to see clearly? So you look on the world and you see what's really there, or is it always a process of more and more evolution and seeing more clearly over time?

Diana Clark: I don't think humans see things like a camera, and never will. We have filters of some sort that are always operating. Maybe that's part of the beauty of photography—that things look a little bit different than with the eyes. Thank you for that question.

Question: As I was listening to the talk and thinking about the concepts around clear seeing, I thought: so often during meditation, the eyes are closed, and it's kind of like clear hearing. But then, during a dharma talk, the mind has to process all of the bits of language that are conveying an idea. There is so much energy to do that, to absorb it, and yet a part is also trying not to judge, but possibly to respond, to refute. That's a lot going on right there. I just noticed that challenge of listening clearly.

Diana Clark: Nice. Thank you. I heard a dharma teacher say that, you know, dharma talks are boring. Don't listen to them! [Laughter] Just sit and let the heart hear. The words are just to entertain the mind, but let the heart feel or let the heart hear. So just get that whole mind out of the way. But you can't, right? I appreciated a dharma teacher who, before his talk, said, "Just ignore what I'm saying, but let the heart listen." So maybe that's one way.

Question: I wonder if you can connect the dots a little bit. I think I understood this implicitly in what you were saying, but always coming back to the present. Because you talked about how there is what is seen and then there's what the mind brings to what is being seen. What I was thinking was, this is why you want the mind to always try to be just in the present moment, because that is what's actually happening.

Diana Clark: Thank you. Yes, and I didn't say that explicitly. I'm glad that you brought this in. You're absolutely right, because coming back to the present moment interrupts the momentum of the story-making and all the judgment and evaluations. Part of the practice of mindfulness is just to help us recognize when we're not in the present moment, too, right? Because so often we're not there. Thank you.

Wishing you all a lovely rest of the evening and safe travels home. Thank you.

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1. **Vipassanā:** A Pali word often translated as "clear seeing" or "insight," referring to the meditation practice of continuous mindful attention. [↩](#)
 2. **Suttas:** The Buddhist scriptures; the recorded teachings and discourses of the Buddha. [↩](#)

3. **Pali:** The ancient Indian language in which the early Buddhist scriptures and texts are preserved. ↩

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Additional transcripts and links to YouTube videos at Moonpointing.com with deep bows of appreciation to Dan Murphy.

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