

Clear Recognition (3 of 5) Comprehension of Suitability

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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Today we will continue the talks on *sampajāna* (clear comprehension or clear recognition). I love the word *sampajāna* because of the way it overlaps with the simplicity of mindfulness practice – simple recognition of how things are – and the richness of a contemplative, reflective life. Both have a role in our lives.

At times, I have thought that from the way Buddhist meditation has been taught in the West – especially vipassana, sometimes the Zen world – people get the message they are not supposed to think at all. There is such a strong emphasis on nondiscursive awareness, to be aware in the simplest possible way, and letting go of thoughts.

Certainly in meditation, it is helpful to quiet the thinking mind – to become quiet and still. But in life, there is a time for a quiet, still mind *and* a time for reflection and contemplation. I think of a reflective life as one that can be calm.

When I use the word “contemplative” as a life of deep reflection, I associate that with calm reflection. It is thinking about our lives and pondering in a way that is intimate, cozy, and nice to do. To be engaged and reflect – we contemplate the nature of our lives and what we are doing.

Clear comprehension encompasses both these areas – quiet, nondiscursive awareness, and contemplation. Yesterday we looked at the first of the four kinds of clear comprehension: clear comprehension of purpose – why we are doing something. The second is clear comprehension of suitability: what is appropriate; how to engage in something; what actions, behavior, and ways of thinking are suitable for our purpose.

An analogy for suitability is that if you try to squeeze oil out of gravel, it will not work. If you want oil, you use something like olives or sesame seeds and squeeze them to get the oil out. We have to know what is suitable for our purpose.

If you are trying to become kinder but do it through aggressive straining, this is like trying to squeeze oil out of gravel. We have to find a suitable way – the right approach. We reflect on suitability. “What is right for me?” “What is the way that I can do whatever I have set my mind on?” “Given my weaknesses and strengths, interests, what nourishes and benefits me, and what the situation requires – what is suitable? What is the right thing to do?”

It is a life of reflection and questioning suitability, as opposed to looking for a policy. Looking for a policy is like, “Maybe if I get the manual and follow it, like meditation by the numbers – 1-2-3-4-5.” But, Buddhist practice is not rote. There is not a fixed way we should act. Rather, we do what is appropriate for the circumstance and for who we are in the situation. Reflecting on suitability, we ask, “What is the right way to do this?”

If our purpose is to follow the Buddhist path to greater and greater liberation and freedom – to clarify and bring an end to suffering, we can ask, “What is suitable for this?” If you spend a lot of time watching movies on the computer – justifying it with, “I need to relax so that I can get on with Buddhist practice” – that probably is not suitable for becoming free of suffering. Watching movies might provide some relief, but it does not penetrate or get to the bottom of the suffering.

What do you do in your daily life? What activities are you involved in? Which activities are suitable for your purpose and which are not?

If your purpose is just one of many things you are doing, and you slide it in here and there, then what is suitable varies. But maybe, the purpose of your life is central: “This is the central thing I want my life to be about. Nothing else matters.” Or, said differently, “Everything matters. But everything has to matter through the lens of my dedication to living a life of freedom, compassion, and care. That is the purpose of my life.” So, what would be a suitable way to express and live that purpose? Do you infuse everything you do with those qualities? Or do you limit what you do and only do those things that really support that purpose?

It is possible to live a life where everything we do is organized around the principle of compassion and care for oneself and others. Or, we can live a life where everything is organized around becoming free of suffering and allowing wholesome states to flourish. Not in a selfish or egotistic way, but because this is beneficial for oneself and others. It is better than the alternative – to continue to suffer, and remain contracted and stressed.

If we are clear about our central purpose – what is suitable to support it? How can we live our lives in such a way that we clearly know: “This way supports what I’m trying to do in my life. It leads me further along this path.”

In that contemplation, we may realize: “This is not suitable; this is not helping me; this is a waste of time. This life is quite precious. We don’t have that much time to be alive. We might as well do the things that are most meaningful, most purposeful. Including – if we understand the path to liberation – to enter into meditation, where we let go of any preoccupation with meaning and purpose because we already have it. Our purpose is to sit and be present for our experience in a deep, intimate way.”

What is suitable? This question also applies to our work life and social life. In Zen practice, they ask a question that relates to suitability. I think it is a beautiful question and a way to go through one’s life. They ask: “What is the request here? What are we being asked?” Even with inanimate objects, there is a feeling in Zen: “What is being asked for here? What is the request?” Rather than coming from our desires, our wishes, what we want, and asserting ourselves on others and the world, we ask: “What is suitable in this situation? What is the appropriate response in this situation? What is the request of the situation?”

I remember a minor event that happened about 45 years ago when I was just getting interested in Zen. I went to the Zen Center of Los Angeles for meditation and a dharma talk. There were two sessions of meditation. Between the two sessions, we did *kinhin* – slow walking meditation – around the small living room. People were meditating on black meditation mats (*zabuton*). Someone was walking slowly in front of me; I was walking slowly behind. I saw the person bend down to straighten a *zabuton* that was slightly crooked.

I thought that was bizarre. Why would one care enough to straighten out the mat? That close attention to detail made a big impression on me. I imagine that if you had asked, “What is the request here? What is being asked in this situation?” – what was being asked was to straighten the mat.

Exactly where is the request coming from? It probably comes somewhat from our inner sensibilities and understanding of the situation and is then projected onto the scene of how it is to be a human being there. The request comes from someplace deeper than just me, myself and mine, and what I want. So, we ask, “What is being asked of me in this situation?” – and we find a way forward.

Suitability – having a sense of purpose and knowing what is suitable for that purpose – is part of clear comprehension, a reflective life. For the next 24 hours, you might reflect on your purpose in the activities that you do, and their suitability or appropriateness. The activities you engage in throughout the day – how supportive are they of your purpose? Are they suitable for your purpose? Are they supportive of a larger purpose and value? Does this kind of reflection benefit you? Is it pleasant for you? Is it supportive for you? Is it suitable? Thank you very much.