

# Mindfulness of the Body (2 of 4) Clear Comprehension of Activities

June 22, 2021

## **SUMMARY KEYWORDS**

Four Foundations of Mindfulness, daily life, walking, carrying, eating, defecating, *sampajāna*, comprehend, purpose, pasture, nourishment, sacred

## **Gil Fronsdal**

We will continue today with some of the foundational mindfulness teachings of the Buddha. They come from the discourse on the Four Foundations of Mindfulness. It begins with a very strong emphasis on mindfulness of the body. We know from other teachings of the Buddha that the practice of being connected to and aware of the body is very foundational to him. In fact, the Buddha makes strong statements that there is no variance to awakening without mindfulness of the body.

I would like to read the next exercise in the discourse on mindfulness of the body. Instead of “monastic,” I will use the term “practitioner.” It goes approximately like this:

*A practitioner is one: who acts with clear comprehension when going forward and returning;*

*who acts with clear comprehension when looking ahead and looking away; who acts with clear comprehension when flexing and extending their limbs; who acts in clear comprehension when wearing clothes, carrying their outer robe and bowl, carrying their plates and dishes and whatever they need; who acts with clear comprehension when eating, drinking, consuming and tasting food; who acts with clear comprehension when defecating and urinating; who acts with full and clear comprehension when walking, standing, sitting, falling asleep, waking up, talking, and keeping silent.*

There are many ordinary activities of daily life described here. When looking one way or the other; walking; sitting; moving our limbs, legs, and feet; lifting and stretching our arms – we clearly comprehend what we are doing.

For example, I am lifting my hand now to make a point. I clearly comprehend that my hand goes up and I make my point with an Italian gesture – the fingers coming together – which I learned growing up in Italy. Or when I am going to the bathroom, I clearly comprehend that I am present and there for it.

Clear comprehension is a very important term. The Pali word is *sampajāna*, which is translated in different ways.

I like “clear comprehension.” The root of the verb is to know or comprehend. There is an emphatic prefix – to *really* know – and I like the word “clear.” I prefer “clear comprehension” rather than “clear knowing.” “Knowing” implies something simpler, whereas “comprehension” is richer in meaning.

In fact, the commentaries suggest that clear comprehension means clearly understanding why we are doing something. We clearly comprehend the suitability, appropriateness, and timeliness of our actions. We are living a life that is suitable for the circumstances. We are responding appropriately to situations. We have a sense of purpose. We are not doing things casually or barreling ahead with our habits of mind. We have a sense of what is worth doing and how to do it.

Clear comprehension also means understanding the pasture of what we are doing. Pasture refers to where we get nourishment from as we are present for things. And that is being present with mindfulness in our direct experience of the body, feelings, mind, and dhammas – the Four Foundations of Mindfulness.

There are many places our minds can be. We know the mind stream that we live in can often take us away, in distractions and fantasy. We can get swept up in irritation, complaining, criticalness, fear, anxiety, and

rumination of all kinds. We can be lost in the past, in planning, and in anticipating the future.

Some of that mind stream is wonderful and appropriate. It can be part of the pleasures of life. But it often does not nourish and support us. We hope to live a purposeful life that is appropriate for the circumstance – and where we feel, “This is beneficial, nourishing, and supportive for me and others.”

To be present and clearly aware of what we are doing, as we are doing it, is beneficial for the world. But when we do not have clear comprehension, old habits – unhealthy motivations and purposes – can take over. We feel and act in stressful ways throughout the day. Sometimes we regret and feel sorry for what we said or did. By the end of the day, we are tired and exhausted from the stress of what we did.

I think the instructions on the clear comprehension of activities are wonderful. It takes mindfulness practice off the cushion when we clearly comprehend all the simple, ordinary activities of daily life. Mindfulness is not only about meditating. There is a non-separation – a holistic quality – to our mindfulness practice when it involves our whole life, all the activities we do.

Mindfulness is growing in all the activities of our life, including meditation. Over time we learn more and more

how growing a practice – moment by moment – can be nourishing and supportive. We learn that being mindful and aware feels better than the alternative – a mind stream involved in reactivity.

It feels healthy and satisfying to be here and present. Being grounded in the body helps us have that satisfaction. Our awareness can then flow through the body in a way that is not colored or influenced by stressful, unhelpful attitudes and thinking.

We learn healthy attitudes and supportive ways of thinking and being in the world. It is not a way of thinking that denies everything and puts up blinders. Actually, it is the opposite. It is being present – in an open way – with it all. The more we can ground ourselves in clear comprehension, the more we appreciate the opportunity to be aware of all the different things going on – including what is difficult, about ourselves and in the world. We do that grounded, settled, and open in a clear way.

This is a training – a practice. Some of us begin learning this in meditation. Then it is great to take what we are learning in meditation and apply that to our daily life activities. We do not do those activities unconsciously or automatically. We have our ordinary daily life activities be the training ground – the support – for living a spiritual life.

I do not use this language much, but it may be evocative or captivating for you. It may get your attention. To live life – in all the little everyday details – is *sacred*. To see and experience the sacred in going forward and returning. To participate in a sacred way looking ahead and looking away. To experience the sacred in bending and extending our limbs. To feel the sacrament of putting on and wearing clothes, and carrying things with our hands. To feel the sacredness of the attention, presence, and engagement in eating, drinking, and tasting.

To discover sacredness in all the different aspects of our lives as we live. The life stream from evolutionary times has come down to us, creating all the different ways we live and sustain our lives, including defecating and urinating. To feel the sacredness, specialness, and nourishment of walking, standing, sitting, falling asleep, waking up, talking, and keeping silent – all of them.

In all our ordinary, everyday activities, we discover this valuable stream of life activity that is better than some of the mental mind streams – streams of attitudes and preoccupations we easily fall into.

May you discover and value your ordinary activities as a place to cultivate a sacred life of freedom, generosity, love, and nourishment.

Maybe for the next 24 hours, you can explore how bringing attention to all the activities of life – the little and big activities of what you are doing – can be nourishing and appropriate for you. Explore how to do them with a sense of purpose and appropriateness. May you be delighted by the opportunity to do that. So thank you all very much.