

Clear Recognition (2 of 5)

Comprehension of Purpose

June 29, 2021

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

sampajāna, clear comprehension, clear understanding, mindfulness, contemplation, reflection, activities, wholesome, unwholesome, beneficial, speech, meditation

Gil Fronsdal

This is the second talk on *sampajāna*, often translated as “clear comprehension.” In the guided meditation, I offered “clear recognition” as the translation I liked best. In the simplest way of doing mindfulness practice, we bring together our ability to be present and aware with our ability to clearly recognize. Sometimes we emphasize one more than the other. We go back and forth.

As the practice gets deeper, more still, quiet and peaceful, sometimes the ability that needs emphasizing – and that helps mindfulness practice come to maturity – is the clear recognition of phenomena. It is the clear observation that recognizes what is happening in the

moment. This recognition becomes quieter and more peaceful, like a whisper in the mind. It is an important factor.

In situations outside of meditation, *sampajāna* is sometimes better translated as “clear comprehension” or “clear understanding.” This translation suggests that Buddhist life involves more than mindfulness – more than moment-to-moment awareness and recognition of what is happening now. It also involves contemplation, reflection, and wise thinking about what is going on. We can understand where things come from and where they are going. We can understand the context and our motivations for doing things. We are able to navigate all the different aspects of our psychological, emotional, physical, and social life. To understand and navigate are part of what makes life rich. It is an important part of life.

Clear comprehension in the world of activities is part of a wise practice. Last week, I read the instructions for mindfulness in activities. As we reach out or bend an arm, there is clear comprehension. There is clear comprehension as we put on our clothes, eat a meal, or go to the bathroom. For every ordinary and non-ordinary human activity we engage in, there can be clear comprehension of the activity.

The ancient commentaries have four different areas that we can reflect on or contemplate, so we can live a wise

life. These areas are clear comprehension of purpose, clear comprehension of suitability, clear comprehension of the pasture, and clear comprehension of non-delusion. Take some time practicing with each of them – long enough so they become second nature. It is not that we bring out a checklist and constrict our life with analysis. These four areas are meant to open us up and free us to live a wiser life.

The first is clear comprehension of purpose. Ask yourself: “What’s the purpose of what I am about to do?” “What’s the purpose of what I am doing now?” “What was the purpose of what I just did?” Sometimes what you think was the purpose might not have really been the purpose. Things can shift and change. Or you are not really aware of the subconscious reasons for why you are doing something. This is when the reflection afterward is very helpful. But it is especially helpful to understand beforehand, when you are wondering what to do: “What is the purpose for doing this?”

For example, when you are standing in front of the refrigerator, ready to open it, ask yourself, “What is the purpose of opening the refrigerator?” Really ask yourself that question. To simply answer, “In order to open the door” is fine in a certain way. Some people will make that answer, perhaps, into a kind of spiritual superiority: “Look, that’s *all* I’m doing – the simplicity of just being present for this.”

But still, opening the refrigerator door has a purpose. “I’m looking for a snack.” “I want to fill my loneliness or distract myself.” Or: “I’m hungry. If I don’t have some food now, I won’t be at my best for the next conversation I have.” Or, “My family is hungry, and I’m going to cook for them.” Or: “I’m going shopping. I need to see what’s in there.”

We keep asking, “What’s the purpose of this?” And more importantly, we ask: “Is the purpose wholesome or unwholesome? Is it a beneficial purpose or not?”

To ask the question, “What is the purpose?” is fascinating to do with speech. In fact, if you want a shortcut to the depths of your inner life – the royal road to the unconscious – keep asking yourself: “Why say what I am going to say? What is motivating me to speak?” Many people speak somewhat impulsively, subconsciously, unconsciously, or without much reflection. There is a reservoir or wellspring of motivations behind what we say. To ask yourself these questions – “Why am I saying this?” “Why am I about to say this?” – can begin revealing some of the layers of what drives you – the operating systems you have.

When we sit down to meditate, we can ask: “what is the purpose of meditation?” This question is not meant to evoke a lot of reflection but to be clear about it.

Sometimes I have sat down to meditate out of rote habit – “This is what I do.” I was not really involved in my meditation. I was mostly drifting along in my train of thoughts – a bit distracted and concerned about things.

I have also sat down to meditate and asked, “What is the purpose of meditation now?” Asking that question makes a difference, even though the answer might be the same every day. “I’m here to be present.” “I’m here to let go of my clinging and attachment.” “To be here in a clear way.” Even if it is the same answer every day, to really say to oneself, “This is the purpose.” That recognition and acknowledgment can give us more stability or emphasis for practice: “Okay, let’s do it.” “Let’s not let the habits of the mind continue to have their own way.” “Let’s show up, be present here, and do the practice.”

To ask yourself, “What’s my purpose here?” – is a great question. If you are talking with someone struggling to make a decision, sometimes it is helpful to ask: “What is the purpose of the decision? What is the underlying value of what you are trying to do, or the intention or direction you are trying to go?”

To ask these kinds of questions is to live a reflective life, a contemplative life. I think it is helpful to spend some time doing that kind of contemplative thinking. I like to go for walks by myself. That is when I contemplate. I am

delighted by the different things that will pop up in my mind. They would not come up if I was living my full life, doing all the usual things. I need fallow time – time away from everything – to let things percolate and bubble up. Often, for me, exercising does the same thing. When I give freedom to my mind, contemplation and reflection can happen naturally.

So, to live not only a mindful life but one that is supported and guided by contemplation and reflection. One key form of reflection is to ask, “What is the purpose of what I am going to do?” This question might be directed towards a particular event or activity happening right now. Occasionally, it is good to open it up and ask, “What is the purpose of my life or my work?” Really explore that. Whatever purpose comes up for you, is that the purpose you want to stand behind, that you want to devote yourself to? Does that purpose feel nourishing, freeing, opening, and enlivening in a good way?

One way of living is to walk the Buddhist path, the path to freedom. Over the next 24 hours, may you reflect on clear comprehension of purpose. Reflect in a relaxed way, supported by the simplicity of recognition. Keep things simple and contemplate. See the benefits and aliveness that come from a clear understanding of purpose. Thank you all very much.