

Clear Comprehension

In several recent talks, both Resa and I have made passing mention of the topic of Clear Comprehension (CC). I got pretty close to going into the topic in a segue about Mindfulness (M) a couple talks ago. The point I made then was that M is far more than simply paying bare attention to what arises in consciousness. A toddler with a skinned knee, crying bloody murder, for example, can be “trapped in the here and now”, rather than be liberated by it.

For M to exist, awareness must take place within a container, so to speak, provided a wise context – the recollection of wisdom gained from considered experience and study – awareness of wholesome dhammas if you will – and the intention to find a way of being with immediate experience that responds to it with wholesome intention and skillful action.

When fully elaborated, this contextual awareness is what we mean by CC.

In the Sattipatthana Sutta, the third section in The Contemplation of the Body is Mindfulness with Clear Comprehension, where it is clear that CC pertains to the body in motion (i.e., where there is intention and action)

... a monk, in going forward and back, applies clear comprehension; in looking straight on and looking away, he applies clear comprehension; in bending and in stretching, he applies clear comprehension; in wearing robes and carrying the bowl, he applies clear comprehension; in eating, drinking, chewing and savoring, he applies clear comprehension; in walking, in standing, in sitting, in falling asleep, in waking, in speaking and in keeping silence, he applies clear comprehension.

It's interesting that this list of activities doesn't include meditation. Perhaps meditation is so intrinsically wholesome the Buddha didn't feel it necessary to mention it here. In any event, I think that CC may be a way of bringing richness of practice to the large portion of life we spend off the cushion.

To look at CC in some degree of depth, we find that the commentaries elaborate four different aspects, or dimensions, of it.

These tend to be taught as separate entities. Certainly, it's convenient to teach them this way. But it's wiser to see these four working together rather than as isolated elements that displace one in favor of the others. If I tell you to think of the most delicious meal you ever had, you might think of it in terms of separate characteristics such as appearance, aroma, texture and taste; but clearly each of these is present at the same time, and these separate elements together clearly comprise a whole. So, I believe it is with the four CCs.

Clear Comprehension of Purpose

... refers to the conscious recognition of our intention or motivation for engaging activity. Ideally, we cultivate and support motivations that support our spiritual development and, minimally, don't detract from it.

To practice clear comprehension of purpose, we pause before we begin any new activity – if only for an instant - to determine whether our intended words, thoughts, or deeds will bring us closer to or further away from our spiritual goal.

Most importantly, if we see that our intention is motivated by any form of greed, hatred, or delusion, we allow it to arise and pass away without acting on it. If, on the other hand, we see that our intention is wholesome, that we are motivated by generosity, loving-kindness, compassion, or wisdom for example, we should feel free to act on it.

The nature of our reflection should be something on the order of: “What intention(s) are driving this action?” Not “*Why* do I intend to do this?” The “*Why*” question opens the door to judgment and justification. The “*What*” question simply seeks to know what’s there, and then follows up with: “Is this action likely to further or support my spiritual growth?”

This being clear on purpose extends to ALL activities; eating, dressing, brushing our teeth, speaking, even being silent. And it applies not just to the action in the abstract (plans for driving later in the day, or eating our next meal), but especially to our momentary participation in the action. For example, asking ourselves how big a portion of food should we take. Am I eating mindfully, right now? Do I need to finish every morsel of food in front of me? Am I hungry, right now, as I’m eating, or is my eating driven by habit? If I eat until I’m stuffed, what does that do to my energy and mindfulness in the hours that follow?

It is the process of being mindful (paying bare attention) that lets us recognize the intentions that would drive our actions, ideally prior to (or even instead of) the arising of justifications and rationalizations. And weighing these in terms of our sense of wholesome purpose guides us in making wise decisions.

Without doing this, justifications and rationalizations arise and convince us to engage in activities that are unwholesome, or engage in activities which might be fine in terms of their external impact on others, but engage in them with unwholesome or confused intentions. When you contribute dana, for example, what are your thoughts and momentary intentions before, during and after the act of giving? Is the giving routine, approached as something to get out of the way, perhaps out of so simple a thought as to do it now so as to not risk forgetting to do it later? Or, as it comes to mind do you reflect on this practice and these teachings you receive being supported out of the spirit of generosity ever since the time of the Buddha himself, 2600 years and counting, with your generosity joining the vast swell of caring and appreciation that spans millennia and covers most of the globe? These are two of countless views and intentions that might color not the gift itself, but what you derive from the giving. Many such thoughts may bubble up in your mind in rapid succession, and there's no harm to any of them. But, which thoughts do you merely acknowledge, which do you turn from, and which do you feed? By virtue of karma, the ones you feed feed you in return.

If there are activities where experience tells us we have difficulty arousing mindfulness, we can plan ahead to vary our routine to promote this. This could be as simple as reminding ourselves in advance to pause at a certain point we know is coming, to assure there is more opportunity for mindfulness to arise. For example, in the area of eating a person might impose the discipline of waiting ten minutes after completing the main course of a meal before deciding whether to have dessert.

Clear Comprehension of Suitability

When the thought of an action arises, even if the intention is wholesome we would be wise to consider whether it is “suitable”, given considerations of time, place and other aspects of context. For example, we may want to meditate but one of our family members is ill or troubled and really needs our attention. The intention to meditate is wholesome, but is out of harmony with the current circumstances. So, we mindfully put it off – if possible with an attitude of generosity.

Another example concerns speech. We want to declare something that is true, but we need to decide when – if ever - it will be *useful and appropriate* to speak this truth.

So, while our first step is recognizing intentions or motivations, a vital next step is to ask ourselves what may be the potential outcome of what we are planning to do? Even if this is a reasonable action in and of itself, is this the right time and place?

From MN 58 (the Abhaya Sutta):

1. In the case of words that the Tathagata knows to be unfactual, untrue, unbeneficial (or: not connected with the goal), unendearing & disagreeable to others, he does not say them.
2. In the case of words that the Tathagata knows to be *factual, true*, unbeneficial, unendearing & disagreeable to others, he does not say them.
3. In the case of words that the Tathagata knows to be factual, true, beneficial, but unendearing & disagreeable to others, he has a sense of the proper time for saying them.
4. In the case of words that the Tathagata knows to be unfactual, untrue, unbeneficial, *but endearing & agreeable to others*, he does not say them.
5. In the case of words that the Tathagata knows to be factual, true, unbeneficial, but endearing & agreeable to others, he does not say them.
6. In the case of words that the Tathagata knows to be factual, true, beneficial, and endearing & agreeable to others, he has a sense of the proper time for saying them. Why is that? Because the Tathagata has sympathy for living beings."

When CCoF S makes it clear that an intended skillful action is not suitable now, what are our choices?

1. Let it pass, freely
2. Let it pass with the intention to let or make it happen at some other time, when it is fully suitable. We can reflect on what future “suitability” might look and feel like, and then

- a. Be alert to recognizing this in the future (and verifying suitability anew when it seemingly appears, as all kinds of other new conditions might be in play then)
- b. Create suitable conditions

Another, far less obvious aspect of suitability, lies in dismissing the persuasions of external causes and conditions, to hold to what wisdom tells us is core. Here's a perfect example, taken from MN 21 (The Simile of the Saw):

... there are these five modes of speech that others may use when they address you.

Their speech may be timely or untimely, true or untrue, gentle or harsh, for good or for harm, and may be accompanied by thoughts of loving-kindness or by inner hate.

I'm pausing in the reading. Consider this list of possible ways people may speak to you. Are you ready to hear a corresponding list of how to hand each of these perfectly? Here's what the Buddha says:

Now this is how you should train yourselves here: "Our minds will remain unaffected, we shall utter no bad words, we shall abide friendly and compassionate, with thoughts of loving-kindness and no inner hate. We shall abide with loving-kindness in our hearts extending to that person, and we shall dwell extending it to the entire world as our object, with our hearts abundant, exalted, measureless in loving-kindness, without hostility or ill-will." That is how you should train yourselves.

Causes and conditions? *What* causes and conditions?

Clear comprehension of the Domain of Practice

In reading articles about third aspect of CC, the term domain is commonly used, but I don't find it particularly illuminating. Another translation used the term resort. This became helpful to me when I thought of the term meaning a resort compound, walled-off and dedicated to a particular activity. What I believe this refers to is knowing the nature of the activity or issue being dealt with at a given point in time; and then using the right tool or tools from our wisdom or practice tool box to work skillfully with it.

Here's what I mean, by way of using the "resort" analogy. If I was going to a water park, I'd bring a swimsuit and maybe a swim mask and fins. If I was going to a dude ranch, I'd bring cowboy gear – jeans and boots, spurs and chaps, and so forth. The different types of resort – waterpark, dude ranch – are like different challenges we have to deal with in life, and the different types of clothing and gear I mentioned – swimming vs. cowpunching – are like the different wholesome skills we develop (through experience, study and practice) to work with these challenges.

One of the handouts I've prepared for you, *The Fermentations and How to Work with Them*, lays out sets of these:

- For working with the challenge of discerning what's wholesome and what's not, use the skill of *Seeing* (Investigation)
- To avoid the lures and seduction of the senses, you'd use skills that have to do with *Restraining* (e.g., guarding the sense doors)
- To engage with the daily necessities of life in a modest way that avoids indulgence and corruption, *Using* (e.g., the Buddha's reflection before eating)
- Dealing with unavoidable difficulties with grace: *Tolerating*
- *And so forth ...*

There's another aspect to CC of Domain, and that is to apply whatever skill-set we employ consistently; without wavering, lapsing or becoming distracted, until the domain changes. Don't take off your chaps until you're done riding through the brush. While mindfully listening to another person, do not let your mind wander off to think about things of which what you heard reminds you. When you segue into your own thoughts, you are no longer hearing what the other person is saying.

So, this is about maintaining focus and concentration; approach everything as a form of meditation, even when what you're doing isn't meditation in the usual sense. Another way of saying this is that we bring a quality of paying bare attention to all our skillful actions.

At its fullest, CC of D thus refers to extending the reach of mindful awareness into each nook and cranny of our lives. It means approaching each activity or mind state with the question, "How do I best use this present moment to further my spiritual awakening?"

Unless we work to penetrate every aspect of our lives with the light of awareness, there will be areas that will remain hidden in darkness even after years of traditional practice. These hidden areas may include our eating habits, sexual behavior, fantasies, gossip, and so forth. We may be using these to avoid dealing with certain deep issues or to find ways to escape from our everyday problems.

Step by step the practice of mindfulness should embrace and become an aspect of all activities of body, speech and mind; so that ultimately, our practice will never be forgotten or abandoned. The aim is to have our life become one with our practice, to have it penetrate into every domain of our being. Let practice pervade all of life!

Clear Comprehension without Delusion

In this last form of CC, practice involves cultivating continual recognition of what the Buddha called The Three Marks of Existence, three intrinsic, pervasive characteristics of all conditioned phenomena: impermanence, the resulting existential unsatisfactoriness of our experience, and the ultimate impersonal nature of that experience.

Of all deluded views dearly held by humans, the most difficult to eradicate is the belief in a permanent self that is in control of our lives. Clear Comprehension without Delusion works to eliminate this deep-seated misperception and replaces it with the challenging realization of selflessness.

With growing awareness of the impersonal nature of causes and conditions, we experience a progressive reduction of suffering, and the dawning of spiritual freedom. When the grip of “I”, “Me” and “Mine” loosens, we come to experience a deep sense of serene joy.

So, this practice is about coming to terms with ultimate truth. But before we reach this we most certainly will come to, and hopefully will work through, a powerful lesser truth: that at many times and in many ways, we are not ready to embrace ultimate truth, or anything like it. We may need to acknowledge that we are at times lazy, unmotivated or eager for distraction, etc. Until we are truly stream enterers, we are worldlings; unawakened and intermittently comfortable in our dozing. We are, in a phrase, *only human*.

CC wo D gives us room to acknowledge this state of “not being *there* yet”. In his dharma talk on CC, Marc Weber tells us that recognizing our limits frees us to let go of reactivity about it – judgements and self-criticisms - and simply investigate where our resistance takes us (most likely into continuing suffering, but suffering of which we are as yet unwilling to let go). So be it. This is now; it’s not forever! If this is our domain, we can reach into our tool box and bring out the skills of investigation, patience, and even humor – and then, hopefully, return informed to our practice!

So, this has been something of a tour of CC in its four aspects, keying into: Purpose, Suitability, Domain and Freedom from Delusion. I hope this has been helpful. Thank you for your attention.