



Mindfulness of the present moment – Knowing what we're doing

The skilful navigation of our raft

Bringing wisdom to our present moment awareness

“Clear comprehension means you know what you are doing, why you are doing it, and whether it is worth doing.” - Ajahn Sucitto

Building upon our foundational awareness of breath and posture, we now delve deeper into our First Anchor of Mindfulness – Mindfulness of the Body – through the lens of **clear comprehension**.

While related, a distinction does exist between present moment awareness and clear comprehension. Clear comprehension goes further by incorporating our motivations and the ethical nature of our actions (which includes the ‘Five Gifts’). Clear comprehension is an awareness with deeper understanding and wisdom, involving an awareness of our actions, intentions, and their appropriateness – a knowing of our internal and external landscapes.

“To be mindful means to be aware of what is happening in the present moment without judging or reacting. This awareness helps us to identify the roots of our suffering, including addiction, and to transform it with compassion.”

Thich Nhat Hanh

This vital quality, in the service of **recognising** what it is to be human, elevates our mindfulness beyond simple, bare attention. It involves not just *knowing* what the body is doing, but understanding the context, purpose, and appropriateness of our actions as they happen.

Gotama emphasised that mindfulness with clear comprehension allows us to understand the true nature of our pain, difficulties and disappointments (dukkha), particularly the suffering caused by our attachments and cravings. By

observing our bodily sensations and mental states with clear comprehension, we develop insight into how our desire and clinging cause suffering.

While mindfulness acts like the anchor keeping us present, **clear comprehension** is the skilful intelligence that guides our actions in the present moment.

Gotama, the Buddha, illustrates this mindfulness with clear comprehension, by describing awareness during our everyday activities:

“... a practitioner knows when he is going forward and when he is going back; he knows when he is looking ahead and when he is looking aside; he knows when he is bending and stretching; he knows when he is carrying his outer robe, bowl, and robe; he knows when he is eating, drinking, chewing, and tasting; he knows when he is defecating and urinating; he knows when he is walking, standing, sitting, falling asleep, waking up, talking, and remaining silent.”

This isn't just passive observation; it implies an awareness *infused with understanding and wisdom*. Traditional commentaries often elaborate on four key aspects of clear comprehension, providing a useful framework for practice:

★ **The purpose:** Understanding *why* we are doing an action. Is it skilful, beneficial, aligned with our deeper values and wellness goals? Wisdom clarifies our intention.

‘Why am I doing this?’

★ **The suitability:** Discerning whether an action is appropriate to the specific time, place, and circumstances.

‘Is this the right action for this moment?’

★ **The mindful presence:** Maintaining mindfulness *as* the field of practice, not getting lost or distracted from the chosen object of attention or the ongoing activity. Am I remaining grounded in our practice?

‘Am I maintaining mindfulness?’

★ **Unconfused:** Seeing the action and the situation clearly, as they truly are, without the distortions of craving, aversion, or ignorance (confusion).

‘Am I seeing this situation clearly, without misconceptions?’

Applying **clear comprehension** helps us *recognise* the often-unconscious motivations, habits, and delusions that drive our behaviour, particularly those related to our unhelpful cravings and compulsions. It bridges the gap between simply noticing an urge – mindfulness – and wisely choosing how to respond (mindfulness with clear comprehension).

In terms of our RAFT to Freedom, if mindfulness helps us be aware of the raft (our body-mind), the water (our experience), and the foundational planks (the Five Gifts), then clear comprehension is a crucial *navigational skill*. It's knowing *why* we adjust the sail (perform an action), judging if it's the *right time* and *suitable condition* to do so, *staying present* while doing it, and seeing the *actual weather conditions* rather than reacting based on fear or fantasy. It ensures we use our raft and its materials skilfully and purposefully on our journey to the safe shore.

Destructive compulsions and clear comprehension

Our human struggle with habitual harmful patterns of destructive compulsions, can be understood as a habitual response to the suffering of pain, difficulties and disappointments. Whether it is substance use, compulsive behaviour, or emotional reliance on something external, compulsive behaviours and addictions often arises from a desire to escape discomfort or emotional pain. Modern neuroscience has shown that these all consuming compulsive patterns hijacks the brain's reward system, primarily involving the neurotransmitter dopamine. When we engage in addictive behaviour, dopamine is released, creating a feeling of pleasure or relief. Over time, the brain becomes conditioned to seek more of this pleasurable stimulus, leading to the development of cravings.

However, neuroscience also tells us that the brain is plastic – it can change and adapt with new habits and practices. This is where mindfulness with clear comprehension plays a role. By observing cravings as they arise in the body

and mind, without immediately reacting to them, we start to weaken the neural pathways associated with our addictive behaviour. This process is supported by findings in neuroplasticity, which suggest that new habits and ways of thinking can rewire the brain, diminishing the hold of our over time.

Mindfulness with clear comprehension and reactivity

One of the most powerful aspects of clear comprehension is that it helps us become aware of our reactivity. In the context of the habits we use to manage pain, reactivity is the automatic response to a craving or trigger. This reactivity might manifest as immediately reaching for a substance, escaping into compulsive behaviours, or numbing difficult emotions.

Clear comprehension invites us to pause and fully comprehend what is happening in the moment before reacting. For instance, when a craving arises, instead of automatically indulging, we can observe the physical sensations and emotional states present in the body. Modern psychology supports this approach: Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), one of the most widely used therapies in addiction treatment, involves identifying and disrupting automatic thoughts and behaviours. Mindfulness practices, often used alongside CBT, help individuals become more aware of these automatic reactions and develop healthier coping strategies.

Through **clear comprehension**, we begin to understand that cravings and urges are not permanent. They arise, stay for a while, and then pass away. This insight reduces their power over us. Instead of being overwhelmed by the discomfort of craving, we can practice *‘riding the wave’* of the urge, watching it come and go without feeling the need to act on it.

“Mindfulness is the key to breaking the cycle of addiction. It allows us to see our urges, cravings, and habits clearly, to recognize them as impermanent and not who we truly are, and to make a conscious choice not to follow them.”

Jack Kornfield

In the poem, 'Autobiography in Five Short Chapters', Portia Nelson beautifully characterises harmful compulsions,, abstinence and awareness:

Chapter I

I walk down the street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I fall in.
I am lost ... I am helpless.
It isn't my fault.
It takes me forever to find a way out.

Chapter II

I walk down the same street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I pretend I don't see it.
I fall in again.
I can't believe I am in the same place.
But it isn't my fault.
It still takes a long time to get out.

Chapter III

I walk down the same street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I see it is there.
I still fall in ... it's a habit.
My eyes are open.
I know where I am.
It is *my* fault.
I get out immediately.

Chapter IV

I walk down the same street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I walk around it.

Chapter V

I walk down another street.

Self-reflections

Consider your own experience with awareness of actions and intentions:

- ★ How often do you move through daily activities (like walking, eating, working, talking, and going to the toilet) on autopilot versus with conscious awareness?
- ★ Before acting, how often are you aware of your underlying intention or motivation?
- ★ Think of a recent action. Can you apply the four aspects of clear comprehension (Purpose, Suitability, Mindful presence, Unconfused) to it retrospectively?
- ★ When have you acted impulsively and later realised the action wasn't suitable or beneficial? What was missing in terms of clear comprehension?
- ★ Can you recall moments where you acted with clarity and purpose, fully aware of what you were doing and why? What did that feel like?
- ★ Could mindfulness with clear comprehension, change your relationship to cravings as they arise?

Journaling prompts

Use your journal to cultivate mindfulness with clear comprehension:

- ★ **Mindful routine:** Choose one simple daily routine (for example, brushing your teeth, making coffee/tea, washing dishes). Practice performing it with deliberate clear comprehension, paying attention to each movement, the purpose, and the sensations involved. Write about the experience.
- ★ **Applying the four aspects:** Reflect on a specific decision or action you took today related to your well-being and journey to liberation. Analyse it using the four aspects: What was the *purpose*? Was the action *suitable* for the situation? Did you maintain mindful awareness (*mindful*

presence) while doing it? Were you seeing the situation clearly (*Unconfused*)?

- ★ **Autobiography in five chapters:** Read Portia Nelson's poem above. Where do you see yourself in that progression right now regarding a specific habit or pattern? How does clear comprehension relate to moving from falling in the hole habitually (Chapter III) to walking around it (Chapter IV), or choosing a different street (Chapter V)?

Clear comprehension and our struggles with cravings

Clear comprehension is a powerful tool for navigating the inner tides that pull us from freedom:

- ★ **Breaking the auto-pilot:** Damaging compulsive urges and addictions thrives on unconscious, automatic reactions to triggers and cravings. Clear comprehension inserts a crucial pause, bringing our conscious awareness to the process *before* the habitual reaction takes over.
- ★ **Investigating craving:** Instead of blindly acting on an urge, clear comprehension allows us to investigate it non-judgmentally: "What is this craving? Where do I feel it in the body? What thoughts accompany it? What purpose will giving in to it serve? Is it *suitable* for my well-being goal? Am I seeing this urge clearly (*Unconfused*), or am I caught in a familiar story? Is this response aligned with my long-term well-being?."
- ★ **Weakening habitual pathways:** By observing urges with mindful awareness and clear comprehension *without* acting on them – '*riding the wave*' – we begin to weaken the reinforced neural pathways underlying the compulsive behaviours (neuroplasticity). We are wisely and consciously choosing a different response.
- ★ **Befriending suffering:** Recognising difficult emotions or withdrawal symptoms with clear comprehension allows us to meet them with the self-compassion we cultivated earlier, rather than reacting with fear and aversion, which fuels the desire to escape via our addictive behaviours. We see suffering clearly (*Unconfused*) and respond with wisdom.
- ★ **Making conscious choices:** As Portia Nelson's poem illustrates, clear comprehension is what allows us to move from repeatedly falling into the hole (habitual relapse into our old patterns) to seeing it,

understanding it, recognising our patterns, getting out quickly, walking around it, and eventually choosing a different path altogether. It empowers us to make conscious choices.

Practices for cultivating clear comprehension in our journey to freedom

★ The body scan with clear comprehension

The body scan, which we introduced in chapter 08, helps us to develop awareness of our physical sensations:

Begin this practice by slowly moving your attention through your body, starting from the toes and moving up to the head. As you notice sensations, apply clear comprehension by asking:

What am I feeling?

Where is this sensation strongest?

How is this related to my current emotions or thoughts?

This practice helps develop a non-judgmental awareness of our bodies and minds, creating space between sensation and reaction.

★ Mindfulness of craving exercise

When a craving arises, sit quietly and observe it. Instead of reacting to the craving, ask yourself:

What does this craving feel like in my body?

What thoughts are associated with it?

What happens when I don't act on the craving?

This exercise builds up the habit of observing our cravings with curiosity rather than reactivity, reinforcing new neural pathways for self-control.

★ Reflection on Intentions

Throughout the day, pause and reflect on your actions.

Ask yourself:

Why am I doing this?

Is this action aligned with my long-term goals?

Does this action lead to more suffering or greater freedom?

Am I staying present and aware?

Am I perceiving reality as it is, free from delusions?

This practice of reflection supports clear comprehension by helping us understand the motivations behind our actions.

★ **Befriending suffering and reactivity**

One of the most transformative aspects of practicing clear comprehension is that it allows us to *befriend* our suffering and reactivity. Rather than viewing cravings, difficult emotions, or discomfort as enemies to be suppressed or avoided, clear comprehension invites us to approach them with mindfulness and self-compassion. By observing suffering as it arises in the body and mind, we see that it is temporary and not something to fear. This understanding helps us break the cycle of habitual compulsive behaviours, which is often fuelled by our attempts to avoid or numb our suffering.

Befriending our suffering means acknowledging it with clear comprehension and allowing ourselves to experience it fully without being consumed by it. As Gotama taught, suffering is inevitable, but how we respond to it is within our control.

Scientific and philosophical perspectives

For those interested in the scientific and philosophical underpinnings of mindfulness with clear comprehension, the following overview highlights key connections.

★ **Neuroscience:** Research has provided compelling evidence for the benefits of mindfulness in addiction recovery. Mindfulness-based interventions, such as Mindfulness-Based Relapse Prevention

(MBRP), teach individuals to observe their cravings and urges non-judgmentally, rather than reacting impulsively. One study (Brewer et al. 2011), showed that mindfulness training can significantly reduce the intensity of our cravings by altering brain activity in regions related to self-control and emotion regulation, such as the prefrontal cortex. By practicing mindfulness, we develop a greater awareness of our triggers and learn to respond to our cravings with curiosity, infused with self-compassion, instead of blind reactivity.

Mindfulness practices have also been shown to decrease the activity of the default mode network (DMN), the brain's autopilot mode that often contributes to our addictive behaviours. When the DMN is active, we tend to ruminate or engage in automatic thinking patterns. By practicing mindfulness with clear comprehension, we quiet the DMN and increase our capacity for intentional, thoughtful responses to our cravings and our emotional discomfort.

Mindfulness with clear comprehension engages higher-order executive functions primarily located in the prefrontal cortex (PFC) – functions like planning, intentionality, decision-making, working memory, and impulse control. This contrasts with habitual or addictive behaviours often driven by more automatic pathways (for example, the basal ganglia). Mindfulness practices, especially those involving reflection and intention, strengthen PFC activity and connectivity, enhancing self-regulation. Reducing the activity of the DMN, associated with mind-wandering and autopilot, allows for more present-moment awareness and conscious choice, key components of clear comprehension.

- ★ **Psychology:** Clear comprehension strongly relates to concepts like metacognition (thinking about one's own thinking and awareness). Therapies like Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) encourage examining the thoughts and beliefs (comprehending non-delusion) that precede actions. Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT)

emphasizes clarifying values (comprehending purpose) and taking committed action aligned with those values. Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT) teaches "Wise Mind," integrating emotion and reason to make suitable choices. Breaking automaticity and increasing intentionality are core goals in behaviour change models relevant to addiction recovery.

★ **Philosophy:** The concept resonates with Aristotle's idea of *phronesis* (practical wisdom) – the ability to discern how to act appropriately and virtuously in specific situations (comprehending suitability and purpose). Socratic methods emphasize self-examination and understanding one's motives. Ethical frameworks across traditions stress the importance of intention in evaluating actions (comprehending purpose and non-delusion). Clear comprehension fosters the self-awareness needed for ethical living and wise decision-making.

Remember to remember

Mindfulness with clear comprehension deepens our practice beyond bare awareness, infusing it with wisdom, purpose, and skilful understanding. It is the crucial navigational intelligence for our RAFT to Freedom, enabling us to **Recognise** not just *what* we are doing, but *why* and *how*, and whether our actions truly serve our journey towards freedom.

By consciously cultivating awareness of purpose, suitability, mindful presence, and the absence of confusion, in our daily activities, we move from automatic reactivity towards intentional living. This careful attention helps us to dismantle the unconscious patterns of destructive cravings and compulsions and empowers us to make choices aligned with our deepest intentions. Let us carry this practice of 'knowing what we're doing' forward as we continue to explore the landscape of the body.

Sutta references

★ **Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10 / DN 22 - The Foundations of Mindfulness):**

This sutta explicitly includes clear comprehension as integral to mindfulness practice.

- *Summary:* In the sections on Mindfulness of Body (and also Feeling, Mind-States, and Dhammas), the Buddha repeatedly pairs Mindfulness (*Satī*) with Clear Comprehension (*Sampajañña*). The passage detailing awareness of daily activities (going forward, back, eating, dressing, etc.) is the primary illustration of *Sampajañña* in action within the context of body awareness.

★ **Commentarial tradition:** While not a Sutta, the traditional commentaries on the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta often elaborate on the four aspects of Clear Comprehension (Purpose, Suitability, Mindful presence, Absence of confusion) as a way to understand the depth of this practice.

★ **Various Suttas mentioning Sati-Sampajañña:** The pairing of mindfulness and clear comprehension appears in numerous suttas, often described as essential qualities for monks and lay practitioners striving on the path (e.g., AN 4.37, AN 8.2).

- *Summary:* These references consistently highlight that mindfulness combined with clear comprehension leads to vigilance, self-control, wisdom, and progress towards liberation.

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