



Recognise - Mindfulness of body

11 - Mindfulness with Clear Comprehension

When going forward and returning, he makes himself fully alert.

— Gotama, Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10), translated by Thanissaro Bhikkhu

Knowing what we're doing, and why

Having gathered breath and posture as our first two lenses on [the first Anchor of Mindfulness](#) - [Mindfulness of Breathing](#) and [Mindfulness of Posture](#) - we now add a third, deeper layer: Clear Comprehension.

The Buddhist word *sati*, mindfulness, simply notices what is here - this breath, this posture, this feeling. Clear comprehension, on the other hand, asks what it means and what to do about it. It doesn't mean a different kind of attention layered on top of the first two; it means the same attention sharpened by wisdom. Mindfulness tells us we are reaching for something. Clear comprehension asks why, whether this is the right moment for it, and whether we are seeing the situation as it actually is.

Gotama's own description of this quality, in his teaching on the four Anchors of Mindfulness, is characteristically plain: whether we are going forward or turning back, looking ahead or to the side, bending a limb or carrying something, eating or drinking, using the toilet, walking, standing, sitting, falling asleep, waking, speaking or staying silent. In every one of these ordinary moments, we can be fully alert to what we are doing. Nothing here is exotic. It is the whole of an ordinary day, held in awareness.

The tradition draws out four aspects of this alertness, each asking a slightly different question of the moment:

- **Purpose:** why am I doing this? Is it skilful, is it kind, does it serve what I actually care about? This question also carries an ethical weight - the same honest foundation named in the [Five Gifts](#) - since an action that truly serves us rarely also causes harm.
- **Suitability:** is this the right action for this particular time, place and situation - whatever the answer to "why" might be?
- **Mindful presence:** am I actually here for this, or has my attention already wandered off to the next thing?

- **Clarity:** am I seeing this moment as it really is, or through the distortion of craving, aversion or confusion?

None of these four questions asks us to freeze or overthink every action of the day - that would be its own kind of exhausting. They describe a quality we can bring, more and more often, to the ordinary business of living: a brief, honest check before we act, rather than a life spent entirely on autopilot.

This matters most where our attention is least free - in the moments when the drives to protect, promote and satisfy pull hardest, and an old pattern of escape or self-sabotage is already halfway into motion before we've noticed it starting. Clear comprehension is what lets us catch that moment a little earlier each time: not by suppressing the pull, but by seeing it clearly enough to choose, rather than simply being carried along.

In terms of our raft, Mindfulness of the Body is one of our anchors - it keeps us here, in this moment, in this body. Clear comprehension is what turns a well-anchored moment into a wisely used one. It is the quality of attention that asks why we're doing it and whether it actually serves our journey to the safe shore.

Clear comprehension and the pull of compulsive and reactive behaviours

Reactivity is the automatic response to a craving or a trigger - reaching for a substance, slipping into a compulsive behaviour, or numbing a difficult feeling, before we've even noticed deciding to. Clear comprehension invites a pause before that happens: when a craving arises, instead of indulging it automatically, we can simply observe the physical sensations and emotional states that are actually present.

This is not only a matter of willpower. Compulsive patterns can hijack the brain's reward system - the neurotransmitter dopamine is released, creating a feeling of relief or pleasure. Over time the brain becomes conditioned to seek more of it, which is part of how a craving takes hold in the first place. But the brain is also plastic: it can change and adapt with new habits and practices. This is where clear comprehension does some of its quiet work. By observing a craving as it arises in body and mind, without immediately reacting to it, we begin to weaken the very pathways that keep the pattern going.

Clear comprehension also helps us see that a craving is not permanent. It arises, stays a while, and passes - whether or not we act on it. Sometimes called "riding the wave," this simply means watching a craving come and go rather than feeling compelled to act on it. This insight, on its own, reduces a craving's power over us: instead of being overwhelmed by the discomfort, we can meet it with curiosity and let it move through.

Practice - a pause before acting

A brief clear comprehension pause (*skip this practice if you find it triggering*)

Choose one small, ordinary action you're about to take today - reaching for your phone, opening the fridge, sending a message, standing up from your chair. Before you do it, pause for one breath and ask:

- 1 What am I about to do?
- 2 Why am I about to do it?
- 3 Is this the right moment for it?
- 4 Am I actually here for this, or somewhere else?

Then simply carry on - either with the action, or with whatever you now notice you'd rather do instead. The practice isn't to get a particular answer; it's the pause itself, and the brief honesty it makes room for.

Widening the practice: the body scan with clear comprehension

The body scan we met earlier can carry this same quality of attention. Moving slowly from the feet to the head, pause wherever a sensation is noticeable and ask: what am I feeling? Where is this sensation strongest? How does this relate to what I'm thinking or feeling right now? This builds a non-judgmental awareness of body and mind together, widening the gap between sensation and reaction.

Meeting a craving with clear comprehension

When a craving or strong urge arises, sit with it for a moment rather than reacting straight away, and ask: what does this feel like in my body? What thoughts come with it? What happens if I simply don't act on it? Approached this way, a craving is something to meet with curiosity and self-compassion rather than fight as an enemy - it is temporary, whatever it insists otherwise, and it will pass whether or not we act on it.

How to practise

- 1 Notice a moment of choice, however small, or a craving as it arises.
- 2 Pause for one breath.
- 3 Ask what you're feeling, why, and whether now is the right moment.
- 4 Widen into the body scan or the craving questions above, if there's time and it feels helpful.
- 5 Carry on - with the action, or with whatever you now notice you'd rather do instead.

Self-reflections

Take a moment to consider my own experience of awareness and intention:

- 1 How often do I move through ordinary activities - walking, eating, working, talking - on autopilot rather than with real awareness? ([view card](#))
 - 2 Before I act, how often am I actually aware of my own underlying intention or motivation? ([view card](#))
 - 3 Thinking of a recent action, can I apply the four aspects - purpose, suitability, mindful presence, clarity - to it, looking back? ([view card](#))
 - 4 When have I acted impulsively and only afterwards realised it wasn't the right thing to do? What was missing, in terms of clear comprehension? ([view card](#))
 - 5 Can I recall a moment of acting with real clarity and purpose, fully aware of what I was doing and why? What did that feel like in my body? ([view card](#))
 - 6 Could bringing clear comprehension to a moment of reactivity change my relationship to it, even slightly? ([view card](#))
 - 7 Of the four aspects - purpose, suitability, mindful presence, clarity - which one do I find hardest to bring to mind in the moment, and what might help? ([view card](#))
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Journaling prompts

Use your journal to deepen your practice of clear comprehension:

- 1 **A mindful routine:** choose one simple daily routine - brushing your teeth, making a drink, washing up - and practise doing it with deliberate clear comprehension, attending to each movement, its purpose, and the sensations involved. Write about what you noticed.
- 2 **Applying the four aspects:** reflect on a specific decision or action you took today. Analyse it using the four aspects: what was the purpose? Was it suitable for the situation? Did you stay present while doing it? Were you seeing it clearly?
- 3 **A well-worn path:** think of a pattern or habit you find yourself returning to again and again, almost without deciding to. Write about the moment, just before it happens, where clear comprehension might open up a different next step - even a small one.
- 4 **Breaking the autopilot:** notice one moment today when you caught yourself mid-action, on autopilot, and brought clear comprehension to it instead. What shifted, if anything, in what you did next?
- 5 **Investigating the pull:** next time you notice the pull of a craving or a strong urge, pause and investigate it with curiosity rather than judgment.

Where do you feel it in the body? What thoughts accompany it? Is acting on it actually suitable for what you care about?

- 6 **Meeting discomfort:** write about a difficult feeling you tend to meet with resistance or avoidance. What might it be like to meet it instead with clear comprehension and a measure of self-compassion, letting yourself feel it without being consumed by it?
 - 7 **Gathering the weeks:** looking back over breath, posture and clear comprehension together, which of the three feels most available to you right now, and which would you like to strengthen?
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Supporting material: neuroscience, psychology and philosophy of clear comprehension

For those interested in the science and philosophy behind this practice, here is a brief overview.

- **Neuroscience:** mindfulness with clear comprehension engages higher-order executive functions largely seated in the prefrontal cortex - planning, intention, decision-making and impulse control - which contrast with the more automatic pathways (including the basal ganglia) that drive habitual reactive patterns. Research suggests that sustained mindfulness practice is associated with reduced activity in the brain's default mode network, the "autopilot" system linked with mind-wandering and rumination, and increased prefrontal engagement during moments of choice. This shift plausibly supports greater capacity for the kind of deliberate pause clear comprehension asks for.
- **Psychology & Psychotherapy:** clear comprehension relates closely to metacognition - the capacity to notice and reflect on one's own thinking. Therapeutic approaches such as Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) examine the automatic thoughts that precede action; Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) emphasises clarifying personal values and acting in line with them; Dialectical Behaviour Therapy's (DBT) "wise mind" integrates emotion and reason in decision-making. Mindfulness-based approaches, including Mindfulness-Based Relapse Prevention's (MBRP) technique of observing an urge without immediately acting on it (sometimes called "urge surfing"), have been associated with reductions in the intensity of cravings for some people, by widening the gap between noticing an impulse and acting on it.
- **Philosophy:** the idea resonates with Aristotle's *phronesis*, or practical wisdom - the capacity to discern the right action in a particular situation. Socratic self-examination shares the same instinct: understanding one's own motives before acting. Across many ethical traditions, the intention behind an action, not only its outward form, is treated as central to whether it is skilful.

These fields converge on a simple point: the pause that clear comprehension makes room for - however brief - is where genuine choice becomes possible.

Remember to remember

Mindfulness with clear comprehension takes the bare noticing of mindfulness and adds a further layer of wisdom: not just *what* is happening, but *why*, whether now is the right moment, whether we are actually present for it, and whether we are seeing it clearly. Brought to the ordinary business of a day - walking, eating, speaking, reaching for what we want - it turns simple awareness into wise, intentional living.

This is not a demand to scrutinise every moment; it is an invitation to pause, every so often, and ask a few honest questions before we act - and to trust that this small habit, practised patiently, changes the shape of a life.

Establishing mindfulness in this way allows a crucial pause before taking action, in order to enable a full apperception of the situation and a sober evaluation of the appropriate way to respond to it. This is vital.

— Bhikkhu Anālayo, *Early Buddhist Meditation, Part 3: The Establishments of Mindfulness*, *Mindfulness* 15 (2024), 733–736

With breath, posture and clear comprehension now gathered, we turn next to seeing the reality of the body.

See the [Index of sutta references](#) (web, D8. The print books carry a consolidated sutta appendix instead.)

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