

Daily Life Practice Retreat Theme

March 2010

Theme for this week's retreat: Clear Comprehension (pali: *sampajañña*)

The theme for this week is clear comprehension. The Pali term *sampajañña* has various translations: clear comprehension, full awareness, fully alert. The Buddha's instructions on the four foundations of mindfulness (the *Satipattana Sutta*) include a section on clear comprehension that encourages us to engage mindfully in all of our activities:

"Furthermore, when going forward & returning, he makes himself fully alert; when looking toward & looking away... when bending & extending his limbs... when carrying his outer cloak, his upper robe & his bowl... when eating, drinking, chewing, & savoring... when urinating & defecating... when walking, standing, sitting, falling asleep, waking up, talking, & remaining silent, he makes himself fully alert".

Additional Buddhist texts expand on the teaching of clear comprehension, encouraging us to recognize how our activities support our understanding of the Dharma. The teaching of clear comprehension helps us to turn our mental and physical activities towards purpose and efficiency.

If this sounds restrictive, consider how often we feel at odds when we feel that our lives don't have purpose and how much happier we are when we conduct our lives in accordance with something that has meaning to us.

The texts describe four kinds of clear comprehension:

Clear Comprehension of Purpose: Clear comprehension of purpose is primarily about the content, or aim of our activity, mainly of speech and bodily action. This teaching encourages us to investigate how the practical purposes of ordinary life relate to our highest aspirations. We are encouraged to bring our activities into accord with our aims and ideals, to consider our priorities and whether our activities come into alignment with our priorities.

Clear Comprehension of Suitability: Clear comprehension of suitability is connected to clear comprehension of purpose. This teaching acknowledges that it is not always possible to choose the activity that is the most purposeful towards reaching our aims, that our choices can depend on our life circumstances and our capacities. We are encouraged to view all of our activities within the framework of Dharma, and reflect on whether these activities do fall within that framework.

Clear Comprehension of Domain: Clear comprehension of domain is described as "not abandoning the meditation during one's daily routine." This practice is what this retreat is all about! We are working with practices that support keeping awareness in mind throughout the day. Nothing is outside the domain of awareness, we can be aware during all of our activities. Clear comprehension of domain brings even the most ordinary and mundane aspects of our daily lives to serve the purpose and suitability of waking up. As the 8th century Buddhist scholar Shantideva says: "How can the practice of mindfulness be performed under these very circumstances?"

Clear Comprehension of Reality: Clear comprehension of reality is the understanding of not-self (pali: *anattā*): that there is no doer, or experiencer behind our actions. This understanding is the result of our practice of the first three kinds of clear comprehension, and is an insight into the nature of reality.

Practices for Clear Comprehension

During the week, we will work with some practices around the four kinds of clear comprehension:

Purpose:

1. Take some time during the first days of the retreat to reflect on the aspirations you have for your life. What are your highest aspirations and ideals? How does the practice support those aspirations? Which of your daily activities directly support those aspirations?
2. What are the priorities by which you actually live your life? Sometimes we live by priorities that are not fully acknowledged. Are these priorities in line with your deepest aspiration?
3. If you feel in conflict about some of your priorities, allow yourself to rest with the feeling of conflict, investigate it and explore it. You might uncover an underlying belief or assumption that the feeling of conflict arises out of.
4. During the week, as you make choices to engage in various activities, practice pausing for a moment to give yourself an opportunity to reflect on the purpose or motivation behind the activity.

Suitability:

1. Take some time to reflect on the activities that you usually engage in during your week. Many of them might not be directly related to your highest aspirations. In this exploration I offer two areas to explore:
 - a. Be honest with yourself about those activities that actually pull you away from your highest aspiration, and see if you can let go of them during this week of practice. Notice the impact that letting go of those activities has on your mind and heart.
 - b. For activities that you need to engage in, but you don't feel are directly in line with your highest aspirations, see if you can come to an understanding of whether they are within the framework of the Dharma, and see if you can engage with them from that perspective.

Domain:

1. Work with the practices suggested for cultivating mindfulness throughout your day.

Reality:

1. During times when you feel a strong sense of "me", see if you can recognize the aspects of the experience that you identify as "me", and see what happens as you observe them.
2. If you find yourself strongly identified with an experience, use a reflection about not-self. You might incline the mind towards thinking the thought: "This experience is not me, not mine, not who I am."