Four Applications Of Clear Comprehension

In the Satipatthana Sutta, the Four Foundations Of Mindfulness, an important practice is described called *sati sampajanna*, typically translated as *clear comprehension*. Here is the relevant passage from the first foundation:

Furthermore, when walking, the monk discerns, 'I am walking.' When standing, he discerns, 'I am standing.' When sitting, he discerns, 'I am sitting.' When lying down, he discerns, 'I am lying down.' Or however his body is disposed, that is how he discerns it.

"In this way he remains focused internally on the body in & of itself, or focused externally... unsustained by anything in the world. This is how a monk remains focused on the body in & of itself.

"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.

"In this way he remains focused internally on the body in & of itself, or focused externally... unsustained by anything in the world. This is how a monk remains focused on the body in & of itself. (translation by Thanissaro)

There is a further subdivision of clear comprehension found in the commentaries describing for aspects of clear comprehension: of *worthy goal or purpose*, *suitable means for realizing the goal or purpose*, *attention to a suitable domain of the four foundations*, and *non-delusion regarding the three characteristics of reality*. The commentaries were written to provide guidance for monastics during their spiritual training, which is certainly relevant; however, in a secular setting, there are valuable adaptations that provide practical as well as spiritual benefits.

These ways of addressing the multitude of life circumstances we are confronted with have a larger and smaller application. The larger application relates to the more important goals and values we want to realize in life regarding lifestyle, committed relationships, major economic decisions, etc. The smaller applications are equally important, but on a smaller scale. These choices could relate to whether to speak or not, what to say, how to approach a daily task, etc. The “smaller” choices often have lasting consequences that affect realizing the larger goals and values of life. Hopefully the following descriptions will clarify the larger and smaller issues related to clear comprehension.

***Worthy goal or purpose:*** How do we choose what is important in life? How do we determine what is worth channeling time, effort and resources into realizing? In the classical Buddhist monastic setting, the suitable goal would be total liberation from dukkha, that is, nirvana. We don’t live in monasteries, so how do we value goals or purposes? Most often, the goal involves something material, which may include purchasing a vehicle (“big ticket item”) or whether or not to buy a book (“small ticket item”). Alternatively, the valuing may be organized around convenience or comfort, for example, whether to drive to a movie theater or stay at home and watch a movie on cable tv. Additionally, a particular attitude or approach to life might be decided upon, such as whether to be truthful, kind or generous.

In the context of lay Buddhist practice, the valuing process is organized around the ethics of the Eightfold Path, that is, Right Understanding (Being aware of the law of cause and effect, that is, karma and consequences), Right Intention (The intention to be kind, compassionate, generous, patient and tolerant), Right Speech (Monitoring internal self-talk and external communications to manifest Right Intention), Right Action (Behavior that manifests Right Intention) and Right Livelihood (Lifestyle choices that manifest Right Speech and Right Action).

Even in that context, a suitable goal could include whether to buy a car, and if so, what make and model we choose. The various options could include new or used, foreign or domestic, van, sedan or hatchback, etc. These materialistic choices are a normal part of a lay lifestyle. The suggestion in the decision regarding the car in the context of the Eightfold Path would consider whether the make and model is affordable, reliable, environmentally appropriate, and so on. Regarding the purchasing of the book, perhaps it violates Buddhist precepts regarding harmlessness because it advocates greed or aggression. Another consideration is whether the book is a distraction and meditation would be a more worthy goal for spending time and effort!

In terms of an approach to life is concerned, how do we value the time we spend each day? One of the main objections to regular meditation practice is “I don’t have the time!” The implication of that is cultivating the clarity (Right Mindfulness) and internal peacefulness (Right Concentration) is not a high value. How is that “spare time” used? Often, it’s to distract oneself in response to daily life stresses. Mindlessly turning on the tv or cruising through the internet become habitual and the habit is hard to break. It might be that the demands of parenting or normal home maintenance are indeed time consuming. In my experience, the time spent meditating (for me, one or two hours a day—45 minutes would be a good standard for most folks) “pays off the investment” in terms of personal relationships and don’t necessarily prevent normal household upkeep that much.

***Suitable means for realizing the goal or purpose:*** Once the worthy goal has been decided, what is the most suitable means for achieving the goal, in the context of the Eightfold Path? We can assume that stealing a car isn’t a suitable means, or stealing the money to buy the car. This brings up the topic of money management, which might include dedicated savings each pay period, set aside for a down payment on the car. In that case, perhaps saving X amount of money per pay period might be the worthy goal, subsumed within the ways to afford the car!

What would be the suitable means for acquiring a book within the frame of the Eightfold Path? Perhaps the book could be checked out of the library; in that case, the worthy goal would be arranging to get to the library, and then the suitable means might be to drive the clunky old car to get there, or perhaps to actually walk there and back. The Winter Park library I belong to is about 2-3 miles away, and I have walked there and back, thereby achieving the worthy goal(s) of maintaining my health and not burning gas to get the book. Another option would be to order the book from Amazon rather than driving to a bookstore and back.

In terms of achieving the worthy goal of daily meditation practice, what would be the most convenient and appropriate time to meditate? I’m a “morning person”, so for me that is the option. There was a time in my life it was more convenient to meditate in the evening, so I did that. What would be the most suitable means for negotiating the time and setting for meditation practice in consideration of family or other obligations? In that case, the worthy goal would be establishing a time and place for meditating congenial for all involved.

***Attention to a suitable domain of the four foundations:*** When a worthy goal and suitable means have been established, it’s important to monitor the process in order to be alerted to changes that would warrant changing the goal or modifying the suitable means. In classical Buddhism, the suitable domain involves where you live and other aspects of monastic life. For householders, it involves expanding the qualities of mental clarity and peaceful non-reactivity cultivated through formal meditation practice to daily life routines. An important way to foster this “worthy goal” and “suitable means” involves the quote at the beginning of this essay, that is, being mindful of how you move through daily routines.

Regarding the worthy goal and suitable means involved in purchasing a car, it is important to monitor your process of managing money. There may be a set aside each pay period towards a down payment, but what’s to be done when it’s discovered that the already owned car needs expensive repairs? Mindfulness can monitor internal reactivity, regarding both thoughts and emotions, to make the best choice available in that circumstance. It might mean buying a newer used car rather than a new one. Another possibility would be some unplanned circumstance that diverts savings, such as a death in the extended family requiring plane tickets and time off from work. Mindfulness and calm non-reactivity can be very helpful in managing surges of emotional urgency and confused thought processes.

Regarding a book, it is valuable to mindfully monitor reading a “page turner” book so that you get enough sleep at night, and have the ability to set it aside until another time. I worked a full-time job and went to grad school full-time; this required significant self-discipline while studying and writing term papers.

In terms of meditation practice, it is important to remember to find ways to integrate the benefits gained from regular sitting time into daily life routines. I have been very diligent in maintaining my daily meditation routine, even when travelling on vacation, willing to modify my plans in order to find the time and place to meditate.

***Non-delusion regarding the three characteristics of reality***: This aspect of clear comprehension is especially important for Buddhist monastics, as his or her whole life is dedicated to the worthy goal of liberation from dukkha. This doesn’t mean that householders don’t benefit from being alert and diligent regarding opportunities to be mindful regarding impermanence, dissatisfaction and non-self. We all benefit from cultivating a lifestyle that fosters the maturing of the Eightfold Path.

Regarding purchasing an automobile, we are bombarded with ads that are designed in very psychologically sophisticated ways to promote a particular model car, van or other vehicle. People are represented as happy, attractive, satisfied and in control with that brand of transportation. Being mindful and self-disciplined regarding that sort of propaganda is valuable. When purchasing a car, it is quite useful to use online resources to research the reliability, retained value and economy of a particular model. This research would involve “suitable means” strategies. In terms of how to negotiate the purchase with sales reps, obviously the mental sharpness and emotional discipline that regular meditation practice provides would be quite beneficial.

In terms of a book, how would clear awareness of impermanence, dissatisfaction and non-self be valuable? Of course, advertising promotes impulsive decision making, and if the reason for buying and reading the book is to provide mindless distraction its spiritual value is diminished.

Regarding meditation practice, once again, the express intention of regular meditation practice is to realize the reality of impermanence, dissatisfaction and non-self in order to further spiritual maturation.

I have known about the four clear comprehensions concept and the strategies for life that they provide. I have consciously used them since I first discovered them in the early 1990’s, and I believe the application of them as provided me with great success in my life, so far. Our debt load is non-existent, we practice a lifestyle that diminishes our ecological “footprint” on the planet, we enjoy good health and a healthy relationship process and we contribute to the well-being of our community. I attribute my role in this accomplishment to the commitment I’ve made to applying the four clear comprehensions. Of course, my wife has actively committed to this process as well. My hope in sharing this article is that it may inspire others to make similar commitments to more clarity and discipline in daily life decisions along the Noble Eightfold Path.