



Mindfulness Association

Mahamudra and Mindfulness Series

Part 2: Compassion

This is the second part of a series of articles exploring how the practice of mindfulness can be contextualised within the Mahamudra teachings of Tibetan Buddhism. The first part has been published in the February 2025 issue of this journal (Choden, 2025). In this article, we explore the role of compassion.

Mahamudra Revisited

At the outset, it can be helpful to revisit some of the key principles of Mahamudra to provide a context for our exploration of compassion. Mahamudra is a highly experiential practice of looking directly at the mind to recognise its true nature. Classic texts make a distinction between mind as the *basis* and thoughts, emotions and perceptions as the *expression* (Thrangu, 2001). We explore first how mind – the basis – is not solid and real as it feels but is an ongoing stream of awareness that is changing moment by moment. It is like the ocean. We then recognise how thoughts, emotions and perceptions – the expression – are also not solid and real as they feel but are like waves rising and falling in the ocean. Through practice we come to recognise how the mind and what arises within the mind are of the same nature just like the waves are of the same nature as the ocean and are merely the dynamic movement of the ocean.

Many texts describe this as “recognising the nature of the mind” (Yeshe, 2018). It is relatively easy to understand intellectually, but the actual experience of recognising this in one’s own experience, and maintaining this recognition in daily life, is quite a different matter. It takes a lot of practice. The starting

point is the simple awareness of the everyday mind. Through paying attention to it with steady curiosity we come to see that this simple awareness reveals a deeper field of knowing that is vivid and clear and replete with qualities such as love, joy and peace. The English word “awareness” is not quite fit for purpose and the Tibetan term *rigpa* (རིག་པ་, meaning *primordial awareness* or *intrinsic awareness*) better describes this non-dual field of lucid awareness that recognises the true nature of mind. Sometimes practitioners describe it as being lit up from within. The more we pay attention to *rigpa* the more it reveals itself to be the ground of our being. It is not exalted or esoteric but right here now and very close. When we touch this place in ourselves it is like coming home to a part of ourselves that has always been free, whole and at peace. Through Mahamudra practice we come to see that this is the true nature of the mind. Furthermore, we come to see that thoughts, emotions and perceptions are the expression of this same *rigpa* awareness just like the waves are the expression of the ocean.

When this insight lands in our experience it is liberating because we see for ourselves that whatever emotional dramas or mind storms arise, their underlying nature is this quality of knowing awareness that is complete in and of itself. Just like the most turbulent waves never depart from the nature of the ocean, so too mental dramas and emotional storms never depart from the nature of *rigpa* awareness. All we need to do is recognise this awareness and relax into it. What naturally emerges from this insight is the understanding that whatever arises in the mind is empty because it is a mere appearance or display of *rigpa* awareness that lacks a defining, solid reality just like the waves have no intrinsic quality separate from the ocean. In the words of Shakespeare, it is all “sound and fury signifying nothing”.

This experience of emptiness arises together with the recognition of *rigpa* awareness – they are two sides of the same coin. In Mahamudra language this union of emptiness and awareness is described as “empty luminosity”. What this means is that knowing awareness always accompanies any experience, because, without awareness, we cannot experience things. When we lean into the awareness it is vivid, clear and complete in and of itself (*rigpa*) and when we lean into the experience, it is empty in the sense that it is ever-changing and merely an expression of awareness just like the waves are an expression of the ocean. The experience of empty luminosity is entirely beyond words. It is touching something in our experience that is always unchanging, clear and at peace. It is called Buddha Nature in the Mahayana texts. When we touch this place in ourselves it feels like coming home – the big homecoming of our lives. The practice is then to stay in relationship with this recognition, because it can easily fade, and to make it the focal point of our practice. This is a high level of practice not easy to maintain, but what makes it accessible is the practice of compassion that is the focus of this article.

Before coming to compassion, it is important to reiterate that the way we come to recognise and rest in the nature of mind as *rigpa* awareness is through the practices of *Shamatha* and *Vipassana*. Shamatha refers to the practice of calm abiding, and Vipassana refers to the practice of clear seeing. The function of the former is to settle and stabilise the mind, while the latter is to see clearly what arises in the mind and to recognise its true nature as *rigpa* awareness. Secular mindfulness is a combination of Shamatha and Vipassana with perhaps a stronger focus on Shamatha. In the first article on mindfulness (Choden, 2025) we focused on Shamatha, and in this article we will explore how compassion strengthens Shamatha. In the third and fourth articles we will focus on Vipassana.

Another important thing to remember is that we practice Mahamudra in the midst of our everyday, ordinary mind. Ordinary mind is a key term in Mahamudra. What it means is that we are not aspiring to exalted states of consciousness, but we are learning to see our everyday mind through a different lens. We are learning to see empty luminosity in everyday experience. Simply put, this means that we recognise the ephemeral, changing nature of experience, and we sense the ongoing thread of lucid knowing that runs through everything. Whatever happens we are not just focusing on the content or story but we are learning to sense the emptiness and recognise the awareness. This is the key difference between secular mindfulness and Mahamudra. With mindfulness we learn to maintain presence of mind as we go about our lives. But with Mahamudra we include the recognition of empty luminosity. In the words of Thrangu Rinpoche: “Self-aware wisdom is the wisdom of direct experience of emptiness and lucidity. Experiencing the unity of emptiness and lucidity will liberate you, but merely being aware of your mind will not” (Thrangu, 2001, p. 47).

The Role of Compassion

In order to see the empty and luminous nature of ordinary mind it is crucial to settle the mind. We need to settle the nervous system. We cannot recognise empty luminosity if the mind is veering off into fantasy, compulsive thinking, worry and distraction. This is the practice of Shamatha. Generally speaking, in Buddhism Shamatha is associated with focusing the mind on a range of supports that build steadiness of focus. Breathing is a key support. Moreover, as we pointed out in the first article, acceptance is very important for Shamatha, as well. In the context of mindfulness, this means that we choose to come into a clear and honest relationship with how we are feeling rather than reacting to what we are feeling. Acceptance then becomes the basis for responding proactively. It entails fully inhabiting our embodied experience. But for many people this is hard because they carry so much emotional pain within themselves. They would rather be distracted so they feel less of these difficult emotions. For this reason, compassion is the crucial next step after accepting what we are feeling.

Compassion taps into prosocial motivations of love and care and qualities like strength, courage and wisdom. It proceeds in two stages: first compassion for what we experience within ourselves (self-compassion) and then compassion for the suffering of other living beings we encounter in our lives. The former is the prerequisite for the latter. An oft quoted analogy is first to put on your own oxygen mask in a plane before helping others do the same.

The reason why self-compassion is so important is because many people are ensnared in self-criticism and even self-hatred, which makes it very hard to show up in the present moment because many of us can't bear to see and feel what we carry in the moment. Therefore, in the modern context, self-compassion is crucial to Shamatha. Through practicing self-compassion we learn to hold our experience in the present moment a bit like a mother might hold her child who is crying. It provides a holding container for our experience and allows it to settle down so that we can see clearly what is going on, which then creates the conditions for Vipassana. This is something we will develop in more detail below.

Generally speaking, Mahamudra practice texts focus more on emptiness and less on compassion. This is because it is assumed that compassion has been practiced before we reach the emptiness meditations that are the hallmark of the Mahamudra practice approach. In truth, emptiness and compassion are inseparable twins and for the practice of Mahamudra to be effective there needs to be compassion, too.

As we discussed in the Part 1 article (Choden, 2025), emptiness is a misleading term. The Sanskrit term is *sunyata* which broadly speaking has two meanings. It refers to the fact that inner experiences of mind and outer experiences of life cannot be conceptualised by the mind. No concepts or labels come close to describing our experience in any moment. So, experience is empty of the concepts and labels we apply to it. The reason why this is emphasised is because we become very attached to our concepts of things and this can mislead us as to the way things really are. Concepts have a way of breaking reality into discrete categories and making it seem that things are separate from one another when in fact they are not. Of course, we need to use concepts in daily life but the *sunyata* view is to hold these concepts lightly. Although they are useful for navigating everyday life, they mislead us when it comes to understanding perceptual experiences more deeply.

This points to the deeper meaning of *sunyata* which is that everything is interconnected. We explored this in the last article in more detail. So, whilst things are empty of the concepts we apply to them, they are "full" of the whole universe in the sense that all of reality is expressed through any one manifestation of reality. For example, a tree is not a discrete and separate organism. It depends on the

soil and rain and sunshine to grow, and so many other natural processes too. In this way, we come to see how nothing exists independently and in isolation; everything exists in changing contexts and shifting relationships.

The “fullness” aspect of emptiness relates to compassion. Here the focus is on what the great meditation teacher, Thich Nhat Hanh called “interbeing” (Hanh, 1987). Any one manifestation of life depends on the rest of life to survive and flourish. This creates a sense of closeness and common humanity. We begin to see how fragile life is and how dependent we are on so many interrelated, natural processes. This is brought into sharp focus these days with the environmental crisis because we can see all too clearly how human actions in diverse areas affect the whole ecosystem of life on this planet. From this sense of kinship and connection come qualities such as warmth and love and care.

In this way the practice of emptiness leads to the experience of compassion because it makes us closely aware of the interconnectedness of all life, and the fragility of life forms that depend for their existence on so many other life forms. This can open our heart to protecting life because we see first-hand how we depend on all of life for our lives to flourish. Similarly, the practice of compassion leads to the understanding of emptiness because through sensing the indivisibility of all life, our close kinship with other people, animals, insects and the environment, we come to see that the dividing lines and categories that we impose on ourselves and others do not hold up in the face of life that is a complex web of interbeing. We see that we do not exist in isolation but in the context of multiple relationships and contexts.

Mahamudra is the union of emptiness and compassion – the phrase that is often used these days is that they are like the two wings of a bird. Another way of putting this is to say that Mahamudra is the recognition of *rigpa* awareness whose nature is empty and whose expression is compassion.

A Practice Approach

I will now present an approach to practicing compassion which has been developed by the Mindfulness Association (MA) over the last 15 years. This approach is rooted in Mahayana Buddhism which places a strong focus on compassion.

A core principle of the MA approach is the “compassionate mess”. This term was famously coined by Rob Nairn, one of the founders of the MA, many years ago. Many people see compassion as an ascent to virtue and goodness and bring to mind great figures like Mother Theresa or the Dalai Lama. When we do this, we can make the assumption that we have to transcend our own human inadequacies and flaws and become good and holy. But the problem is that very soon we might begin to feel that we are not up to the task. We might say to ourselves, “I am not sure if I can really practice compassion

because I know in my guts that I am not really a compassionate person, so I best drop this pretence and stick to mindfulness that feels more manageable.”

Rob’s point was that compassion is not an ascent to holiness and perfection but a descent into our messy humanity. It is not about going up but going down. Instead of it being co-opted into the perfectionism of the modern consumer culture and positive thinking, true compassion is about embracing imperfection and the shadow aspects of our personality. When we embrace our messy humanity that is when we connect with authentic compassion. In his words: *“In my early retreats I would begin by insulting my audience and saying things like, ‘Face it, you are all a bunch of neurotic messes, and what is more I am the biggest mess of you all! So how about we just mess around together and stop pretending!’ The effect was huge. Instead of feeling indignant and taken aback, there was a palpable sense of relief in the room. People could let themselves off the hook of trying to be good and perfect and just accept and befriend the wonderfully quirky and unique person that they really were. I would notice people furtively looking around and thinking, ‘Well maybe these people are like me; they are also insecure and vulnerable and longing to be loved and accepted for who they are - not for who they think they should be.’ This was always a poignant moment”* (Choden & Regan-Addis, 2025, p. 62)

The compassionate mess corresponds to the classic Buddhist image of a lotus flower growing out of the mud at the bottom of a lake. It is found in the story of Chenrezig, the bodhisattva of compassion. According to this story, the invitation of spiritual practice is to descend to the bottom of the lake and to befriend the mud. It represents the parts of ourselves we may have pushed out of conscious awareness, like sadness, grief, unworthiness and shame. In the words of Carl Jung, it is our shadow. The lake represents our conscious awareness and the deeper we go down the more unconscious our experience becomes. The surface of the lake is where our conscious awareness meets the world. When we descend and approach the mud something begins to germinate at the bottom of the lake. This is the seed of compassion that has always been there but which has been covered over by the mud. Once we turn our attention to the mud with a motivation to approach the pain in our lives, and the pain in the lives of others, the seed begins to germinate and the mud becomes the fertiliser for the growth of the lotus seedling. The lotus flower is our emerging compassionate nature and the particular flavour of our mud gives a unique shape and texture to the flower which grows out of it. For example, if our mud is to do with issues of addiction, then the flower that comes out of this mud – our unique compassionate nature – can help others who have issues with addiction. This is a powerful metaphor that speaks to the process of compassion, how it arises and how our unique life experience shapes the compassionate person that we become.

Professor Paul Gilbert was struck by the story of the lotus and the mud because, for him, compassion is about relating to the dark side of human nature. It is not about becoming shiny, happy people but cultivating prosocial motivations and emotions that enable us to reach out and engage with the mud of this life. Through working with Paul, we became strongly influenced by the evolutionary model of compassion found in Compassion Focused Therapy (CFT), which he pioneered (Gilbert, 2022). The MA approach is in many ways a fusion of Mahayana Buddhism and evolutionary psychology along with other influences, too. What knitted us together was the idea of compassion being a process of descent and a way of working constructively with the mud of life.

In various writings, the Dalai Lama defines compassion as the sensitivity to the suffering of self and others with a deep commitment to relieve both suffering and its causes (Dalai Lama, 1995). This became the working definition of the MA approach to compassion training. Paul Gilbert also uses this definition in CFT. He identified two psychologies, or processes, that are central to how compassion is applied in practice. The first is the willingness to approach suffering rather than avoid it and the second is to build inner capacities and resources to hold and respond to suffering.

The notion of the compassionate mess and the mud at the bottom of the lake relates directly to ordinary mind in Mahamudra. In order to see the empty and aware nature of what arises in our everyday mind, we need to be fully in our experience and not split off from it. This calls for a deeper embodiment that is not easy because it puts us in touch with deeper levels of pain and trauma that might be locked into our body-mind. This is the deeper meaning of the compassionate mess.

Compassion provides the context whereby we can approach our messy humanity and learn to hold it with kindness and care. It provides the skills to descend and befriend the mud at the bottom of our lake. This requires both the willingness to go there – the first psychology – and also it requires that we build the inner capacity to make this journey and not just throw ourselves headlong into the mud – this is the second psychology.

As a teacher of both secular mindfulness and Buddhist approaches, it strikes me that people really need to bring compassion to deeply held pain within themselves. The compassion process provides the tools for this journey of deeper embodiment. It is about learning to feel safe in our own skin. Without doing this important work, the insight methods of looking at the nature of mind can be fragile and easily disrupted by unintegrated psychological material. Simply put, we cannot fully be present in ordinary mind for long enough for the methods of Vipassana to take root. This was something I discovered when I did a long retreat in the Tibetan tradition. Most of us were very committed to the path of awakening, but we ran into such strong mud at the personal level that we found it hard to hold

the process of integration and many people bailed out. They needed to do more work on themselves at a personal level for the deeper practices to take root. They also needed the profound practices of Mahamudra to be reframed in such a way that their human messiness was an integral part of the journey of awakening rather than a distraction from it.

Self-Compassion

This brings us to self-compassion which we touched on earlier. This was not part of traditional practice in Buddhism. There was not a distinction made between compassion for others and self-compassion. The latter was seen as an integral part of the process of developing compassion. The focus was more on compassion for others because it was perceived that people loved themselves too much already and this could become the basis for self-fixation that is the main target of Buddhist practice. But, in fact in the modern West the problem is the exact opposite – people hate themselves too much!

At the first conference convened by the Dalai Lama with Western Dharma teachers with in 1992, he was told by many prominent Western meditation teachers how endemic self-criticism and self-hatred were for Western practitioners. He was amazed. He found it hard to believe that people hated themselves. This was not something he had encountered in the Tibet of old where he grew up. He also found it hard to understand the phenomenon of shame amongst modern Dharma practitioners. This shows the power of cultural context and social conditioning in shaping the mind and how it then calls for a shift in emphasis in how we then train the mind.

For this reason, there is a strong focus on self-compassion in modern secular trainings in compassion. The popular Mindful Self-Compassion programme developed by Chris Germer and Kristin Neff focuses exclusively on self-compassion (Neff & Germer, 2018). We have included some of their practices in the MA approach to compassion training. Even some traditional Tibetan teachers are now focusing on self-compassion because they realise that this first needs to be addressed before people can open their hearts to others.

As we mentioned before, self-compassion is an important ingredient for deepening Shamatha in the modern Western context as a precursor to the insight practices of Vipassana. It is an antidote to self-criticism that can have the effect of hardening and polarising our inner experience. Our inner world can start to feel edgy, stressed and weighed down by oppressive thinking. This is because self-critical thinking stimulates threat circuitry in the brain galvanised for fight and flight – but there is nowhere to run from the inner critic because it is a condemning voice lodged in our very own head! This makes the clear seeing of Vipassana almost impossible because it is like trying to see through a heavy fog.

Shamatha takes root best in an inner environment where the hard edges of experience are softened by the energy of warmth and compassion. Self-compassion taps into motivations and emotions that generate an inner environment of friendliness and compassion within the mind. We can begin to sense an inner kinship, connection and flow between the different parts of ourselves and there is the experience of our hard edges and issues being held in a kind and loving energy. This contributes to the clear seeing of Vipassana that uncovers the ephemeral and ever-changing landscape of inner experience that gradually opens the door to *rigpa*, or nature of mind. If, however, our inner world is fraught with self-condemnation and anger, and stress hormones are charging through our system, the process of Vipassana is likely to be disabled and the door to the nature of mind will remain firmly shut.

When the practice of self-compassion deepens, there is an inner shift in one's being. We start to identify the parts of ourselves that need holding and care, perhaps sad, anxious or wounded parts. We then begin to sense a deeper part of us that can do the holding. This process is aptly described by the term the "holder and the held" used by Tara Brach (Brach, 2020). Much of the inner work is then to build the capacity of the compassionate holder within. We do so by tapping into qualities that are inherent within us and bringing these to the fore, such as kindness, strength, wisdom and courage. According to Buddhism, these qualities exist as potentials within us, a bit like the seed beneath the mud, but we need to nurture and cultivate them so that they come into conscious expression. Once they do, we respond to the parts of ourselves that are suffering and then to other people, animals and the environment in ever-expanding circles.

Cultivating our capacity for compassionate holding lies at the heart of compassion training both in Mahayana Buddhism and the Evolutionary Model pioneered by Gilbert (2022). In CFT, the compassionate holder is described as the "compassionate self". People are taught to align with this part of ourselves and to relate compassionately with the other parts of the psyche such as the "big three" of anger, anxiety and sadness.

Many third-wave therapeutic systems take a similar approach of first identifying with our compassionate self and then taking care of the other parts of the psyche from this vantage point. One such approach is Internal Family Systems (IFS; Schwartz, 2023). The founder of IFS, Dick Schwartz came from a background in family and systems therapy. He recognised that people needed to befriend the defence mechanisms in their psyche because these immature forces were running the show in a way that was not conducive to happiness and integration. Much of his work was about building a relationship with these protective mechanisms because he saw that they shielded us from feeling areas

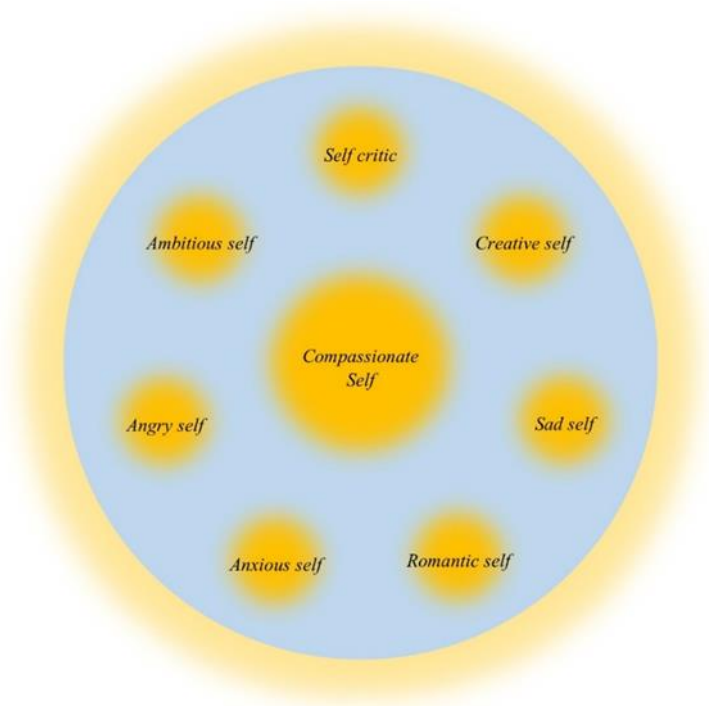
of emotional pain, which he called exiles. Once we befriended the protectors they gradually released their grip on the exiles and a process of healing became possible.

The important discovery he made was that when the protectors eased their tight grip on the mind there was more inner space, and this allowed another part of us came to the fore. What amazed him was that this part was always whole, undamaged and free even in the case of very damaged people. He called this part the Self and his therapy work became a Self-led process. He realised that, if people identified with the Self, they were aligning themselves with a part of themselves that was whole, and this then became the force of inner healing for the parts that were less than whole. Paul Gilbert took a similar approach with the compassionate self in CFT.

He then realised that what he was calling the Self, Tibetan Buddhists were calling Buddha Nature, or the Buddha Within. He had made the same discovery but in a different way. What is interesting here is that modern psychology and ancient wisdom are coming to the same insight but in different ways – they are coming to the truth of Buddha Nature. According to Buddhism, this primordial nature has two interrelated aspects: compassion and wisdom. The compassion is easier to access than the wisdom, so we first cultivate this part – the inner compassionate holder – and once the inner system settles it is easier to access the wisdom. This is what we will focus on in the fourth and fifth articles. This also has important implications for the practice of Mahamudra which we will discuss below.

Mandala Principle

Within Tibetan Buddhism the compassionate holder is expressed by the principle of deity and mandala. The deity is an expression of our Buddha Nature and its manifold qualities, and the mandala is the energetic field of the deity. Mandala refers to an energy system with a centre point and periphery. The mandala principle is illustrated on Figure 1. The centre point is analogous to the still point of a turning wheel and the periphery is where all our conflicts and dramas play out, often fuelled by the emotional afflictions (*kleshas*). At the centre of the mandala is the deity which is like an inner portal to the ground of our being that is always whole, free and at peace. The Tibetan word for deity is *Yidam*, which literally means “mind link”. It is creating a link to this inner reservoir of qualities that we can tap into and learn to express qualities such as love, compassion, joy and equanimity.



When we imagine ourselves in the form of the deity, this facilitates a shift in identification from the parts on the periphery to the centre point of the mandala. We identify less with the anxious, sad or depressed sides of our nature and more with our inner core of compassionate holding and presence. This is very important for the practice of Mahamudra because we are learning to shift from a sense of self that is fractured and polarised to a sense of “self” that is knowing and aware. Through identifying with the deity at the centre of the mandala, we sense how *rigpa* awareness animates all the experiences of life, and we sense too how all experience is empty in that it is subtly changing and embedded in the fabric of interbeing. This is the key Mahamudra insight. Following on from this, we come to recognise that who we really are is this *rigpa* awareness. We are no longer tightly identified with being a discrete individual with a bundle of issues and afflictions, but we are *rigpa* awareness that experiences our very unique and imperfect life. This shift is from *I am so and so living this life* to *I am the presence of awareness experiencing this life*. This is the point where the door to recognising the nature of mind swings open.

The principle of deity and mandala facilitates this shift. The deity is like an intermediary between ourselves as a seeming solid and separate being to ourselves as the expression of open awareness. Interestingly, in Tibetan Buddhism there are two routes to Mahamudra. One is through Shamatha and Vipassana practice in sitting meditation, and another is through deity practice that works with ritual, mantra and imagination. They both lead to the same destination, and they equip us with different perspectives and tools on the journey to this shared goal.

What prepares the ground for this crucial inner shift is the practice of compassion, and in particular self-compassion. This helps us to access our core, which is a place of compassionate holding and presence. This then matures into the wise and compassionate “self” that is synonymous with the deity. We start the process by settling our inner system (another way of describing Shamatha). We do this by offering compassion to the parts of ourselves that need it, and once they settle down we can then come to know the centre point of the mandala in a direct and immediate way.

This transition is well expressed by Daniel Siegel in this wheel of awareness practice (Siegel, 2020), which has close correlations with the mandala principle. Like many new discoveries, he came upon it by accident. He was looking at the coffee table in his sitting room one day, and it struck him that it resembled a model of mind. It was shaped like a wheel with a circumference and spokes leading back to the hub at the centre – very much like a mandala. The circumference was like the periphery, the spokes represented the faculty of attention, and the hub was the centre of the system. He then developed a practice called the *wheel of awareness* in which he helped people to differentiate and integrate different aspects of their consciousness. For him the circumference was *what is known*, and the hub was *the knower*. Through doing this practice, people began to notice and differentiate the different aspects of their conscious experience from one another. This had the effect of creating an integrated whole a bit like an orchestra. First, one focuses on each of the musicians and the tunes they play, and then you bring it all together in the symphony.

For our purposes, the key point is that once he settled the inner system through the process of differentiation and integration it was then possible for people to turn the spoke of attention back to the hub and come to know the centre directly. This is the practice of being aware of being aware that is a key wisdom practice which we will come to in the fifth article. But just like Siegel encouraged people to first differentiate and integrate the aspects of their conscious experience, the deity and mandala approach works in a similar way. It encourages us first to come to know and settle our inner system through the practice of compassion. Only then do we turn our attention to the centre, the place of knowing awareness. Without coming to know the centre directly it is less likely that we will recognise *rigpa* awareness to be who we are. Expressed in Mahamudra language, it will be hard for us to recognise and abide in the nature of mind.

Compassion for Others

Once we have cultivated the sense of inner compassionate holding and presence, this naturally extends to others. The model used by the MA is the Four Immeasurable Qualities of loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity. In Theravada Buddhism this is called the Four

Brahmaviharas. This is a balanced and integrated approach to cultivating compassion. We start with an attitude of friendliness to everyone and everything we encounter in our lives. The Sanskrit term *maitri* is closer in meaning to friendliness and warmth than the more common translation as loving-kindness. Where this friendly engagement encounters suffering it becomes compassion, and where it encounters the simple good things in life, including the happiness of others, it becomes sympathetic joy. The principle of equanimity applies equally to each of the other qualities. Equanimity here means a warm engagement with all of life without being limited by our reactions, judgments and preferences. This quality encourages us to widen the reach of our heart beyond those we like to those we do not know and even to those we do not like. In this way the loving kindness, compassion and joy are extended to loved ones and friends, strangers, those we do not like and then all living beings everywhere.

The expansiveness of mind and heart that comes from practicing the Four Immeasurable Qualities supports the Mahamudra view of the mind being like the wide-open sky that is without centre or boundary. It is not confined within our body nor is it limited by our immediate family and tribe; it extends out in all directions. The meditation of the Four Immeasurables is a practical way of doing this. The Four Immeasurables express the sense of interbeing that is textured by each of the qualities. Mahamudra encourages a widening of our perception to include all of life. It has a feeling of big mind and big heart. This comes from the recognition that our innermost identity as *rigpa* awareness is not limited to ourselves; it is present in all that lives and in all things. Moreover, this *rigpa* awareness is textured with the qualities of love, compassion, joy and even-mindedness found in the Four Immeasurable Qualities. For this reason, the practice of compassion is an inseparable companion to the practice of emptiness that is the hallmark of Mahamudra training.

Mandala Practice

This practice follows on from the mandala principle described above and comes from the book, *Compassion Based Living Course* co-written by the author and Heather Regan-Addis (2025, p. 171)

Begin by forming an intention to practise compassion for yourself and others and then affirm your compassionate motivation that might take the following form: I open my heart to myself and others with kindness and understanding. Through this practice, may I contribute to reducing suffering and increasing wellbeing. May I help all living beings come to realise the primordial purity at the core of their being.

Sit in a relaxed and comfortable posture on a cushion or chair. Then pay attention to the rising and falling of your body as you breathe. To help settle your mind, try deepening your in-breath a little and lengthening your out-breath. See if you can regulate your breathing so that your in-breath and out-breath are of a similar length and rhythm. You might like to count to three or four on the in-breath and a similar count on the out-breath. When your mind begins to settle, let go of counting and let your breathing find its natural rhythm.

Now consciously identify with your compassionate self that lies at the centre of your personal mandala. This is done in stages. Begin by imagining your body to be like a mountain supported by the vast earth below or like mighty tree with roots deep in the soil. Notice how the vast Earth holds your body unconditionally. Connect to the sense of security and stability that comes from visualising in this way. You might discover that you can tolerate and hold more than you think you can. This is the strength quality of your compassionate self.

Build on this visualisation by imagining your breath to be like the wind, or like a gentle breeze caressing the mountain or the tree, and your mind vast and open like the clear blue sky..... Body like a mountain, breath like the wind, and mind like the clear blue sky.....

Whilst staying connected to your compassionate self at the centre of the mandala, bring to mind something you are struggling with in yourself – a part of you on the periphery that has been activated: maybe feelings of anger or anxiety or sadness, or a combination of these feelings.

See if you can bring this part to mind in one of two ways: either imagine this part as it plays out in your life, like watching a video of yourself as you go about your daily activities, being aware of how this part manifests in the way you think, feel, talk and move around; or you can simply connect to how this part feels inside you. The second approach is more subtle, so be sure to create a sense of perspective and objectivity while you remain identified as the compassionate self that is witnessing the part that struggles. The visualisation of body like a mountain, breath like the wind and mind like the clear blue sky can help with this.

Now see if you can look objectively at this part of you that is struggling with the eyes of understanding. Notice how this part of you has arisen from the many complex forces that have shaped your life. See if you can connect with the wisdom of no blame: it is not your fault that you feel this way; it makes perfect sense given your life history, and many other people feel this way too. This is the wisdom quality.

Now see if you can bring some warmth and kindness to what you are feeling. You can use the self-compassion gesture of the hand on the heart and also the mantra “soften, soothe and allow”. You can imagine the warmth of compassion being like a golden sphere in your heart centre – the sunshine of compassion in your heart. This is the quality of kindness.

See if you can stay connected to the part of you that is struggling, instead of avoiding it or getting lost in distraction. It is like you are communicating to this part of you that you are there for it and you are supporting it. This is the quality of commitment which takes some courage too. But remember to stay within your window of tolerance.

As you do this practice, be sure to remain connected to your compassionate self at the centre of the mandala. If you find that you are sucked into the drama of a particular part, or things feel too intense, then come back to mindfulness of breathing and re-establish the visualisation of body like a mountain, breath like the wind and mind like the clear blue sky.

The essence of this practice is simply to stay present with the part of you that struggles - just allowing the compassionate centre in you to be in relationship with the part that struggles. If other difficult parts or issues arise, then see if you can relate to them in a similar way too.

At the end of the practice, imagine that the part that struggles is drawn back into you and you continue to hold it with wisdom and compassion. Then rest for while without any specific focus. Finally share the benefits of this practice with others who struggle like you do, making the wish that they find the wisdom and courage to relate skilfully to the wounded, painful parts of themselves.

You can listen to the audio recording of this practice, which can be found on the Mindfulness Association website: <https://www.mindfulnessassociation.net/about/publications/mahamudra-and-mindfulness-series/>

Bringing Practice into Everyday Life

It is best to do this practice every day. A session duration of 30–45 min (or longer) is recommended so that the mind can properly settle. Ideally, it will be best to practice twice a day, once in the morning and again in the evening, but this depends on life circumstances. It can be helpful to build up to this practice in stages. First, you can do a regular mindfulness practice from any tradition and then include self-compassion. Once you get a sense of a compassionate holding presence within, the mandala practice is a way of building on this and then opening up to the parts of yourself that need compassion. Once you do this for yourself, you can do it more easily for others. At one level, you offer compassion to people for whatever struggles and issues are going on for them. At another level, you make the wish that they contact the centre of their mandala and live from that place. This is an expression of *bodhicitta* – wishing that others wake up to their Buddha Nature.

It is also helpful to have a daily life practice of self-compassion. A helpful practice is the self-compassion break by Neff and Germer (2018). When you notice that you are feeling stressed, pause and sit for a few minutes. Try placing your hand on your heart or somewhere else on your body. You can also hold a symbol of compassion like a pebble. The hand gesture is a way of making contact with your body that carries so much and bringing self-care, just like you might put your hand on the shoulder of someone who is having a hard time. Acknowledge that this is a moment of stress. See if you can offer yourself some self-care. Try using a friendly voice tone in how you talk to yourself. There is strong research evidence from CFT to support this. Then take a few mindful breaths in which you breathe in a quality of soothing and care. Recognise that many other people are feeling like you just now, even though their circumstances may be different. Then move back into your daily routine but see if you can

maintain the sense of embodied compassionate presence. If you feel stressed again later in the day, do the practice again. It only takes a minute or two. In this way, we gradually punctuate our day with small acts of mindful and compassionate awareness. Together with the mandala practice this builds the power of Shamatha or calm abiding that is the foundation for the clear seeing of Vipassana that is the cornerstone of Mahamudra.

Conclusion

At the heart of Mahamudra are the practices of Shamatha and Vipassana. We practise them in ordinary mind. This is our everyday mind with all its ups and downs. Compassion, and in particular self-compassion, helps build the strength of Shamatha because it contains and settles the many stresses and difficulties we experience on a daily basis. This leads to a growing sense of embodied presence that can hold the ups and downs of life. This embodied presence is compassionate by nature because it is responsive to suffering – it recognises, holds and responds to the suffering that shows up in our lives. Many psychological approaches work in a similar way, such as CFT and IFS. This brings about a crucial inner shift in the mind. We begin to inhabit the centre of our energy system or mandala rather than being tossed and turned by the parts of ourselves on the periphery. This understanding derives from the principle of deity and mandala that is a key element of the tantric path, and one of the pathways to Mahamudra. The journey to the centre allows us to tap into qualities from which we relate to the different parts of ourselves and offer them care and support. Initially, this a compassion process and it builds the power of Shamatha. Once our inner system has settled, we can then come to know the centre directly. This is a wisdom process. Siegel (2020) describes this as turning the spoke of attention back to the hub of knowing in the wheel of awareness. In the Mahamudra tradition this is the practice of becoming aware of being aware. This is the wisdom practice that we will come to in the final article of this series.

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