Mindfulness Association

Mahamudra and Mindfulness Series

Part 3: Insight

This is the third part of a series of articles exploring how the practice of mindfulness can be guided by the Mahamudra teachings of Tibetan Buddhism. Part 1 and 2 of this series have been published in the February and May 2025 issues of this journal (Choden, 2025a,b). In this article, we explore the role of insight.

Key Thesis

The key thesis of this series of articles is that secular mindfulness naturally goes in the direction of realising the nature of mind. This term is central to the Mahamudra practice tradition of Tibetan Buddhism. Put simply, it means that we come to know for ourselves the deeper truth of our own minds which then opens the door to a profound state of awakening and freedom.

Up to now, secular mindfulness approaches have tended to be clinical adaptions such as Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR; Kabat-Zinn, 1990) and Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT; Segal et al., 2002) which are concerned with how mindfulness can alleviate stress and mitigate low mood. This has been called first-generation mindfulness programmes (Van Gordon et al., 2015). It is my submission, however, that, once our minds have settled and we are less afflicted by low mood and stress, there is a natural trajectory to mindfulness practice that takes us toward realising the true nature of mind. This is the approach taken by the Mindfulness Association with its Mindfulness Based Living Course (MBLC) course (Choden & Regan-Addis, 2018). This has been called second-generation mindfulness (Van Gordon et al., 2015).

This approach draws on the great wisdom traditions of the East and allows mindfulness practice to come to its full maturation. This does not mean that we need to become Buddhists. It does not entail taking on religious dogma or tradition, either. Furthermore, it is not that Buddhism has laid claim to this deeper realisation and non-Buddhist, secular people do not have access to it. It all depends on our motivation and depth of practice. It does entail, however, consistently following key experiential principles and steps in our meditation practice. This is the focus of this article.

Psychological Insight

Generally, meditation falls into two stages: *Shamatha* and *Vipassana*. The first is calm abiding meditation and the second is insight meditation. We first need to settle the mind and find stability of attention and focus before we can see deeper processes at work within the mind. If you want to see into the depths of a mountain pool, the water first needs to settle, which is the function of shamatha, after which you can look into its depths, which is vipassana. Parts 1 and 2 in this series were focused on shamatha while this article (Part 3) and the next one (Part 4) are focused on vipassana.

Essentially, vipassana is about seeing clearly what arises in the mind as well as recognising the nature of the mind itself. The former precedes that latter. Initially, the focus is on noticing thoughts and recognising when we fall under the power of thinking that does not serve us. This is the role of conventional mindfulness practice. As our practice develops, we begin to recognise the unseen habits that drive our thoughts. These are habits of thinking and reactivity that we do not see clearly but which shape so much of how we think and act. This takes us into the territory of vipassana. An example of this is always trying to please others rather than living according to our own authentic values because we have been brought up to be dutiful and compliant. So many people live under the power of deeply ingrained habits and beliefs that can distort and narrow their lives in so many ways and cause themselves and others so much suffering. When they see these habits clearly, it can be liberating but also a source of grief and sadness because they recognise that they did not have to live this way; it was like they were living under a spell.

This is the focus of the Insight Module run by the Mindfulness Association (MA). It concerns psychological insight. One student described the process by using the analogy of a spreadsheet. With conventional mindfulness practice we become aware of the different figures that appear on the spreadsheet. This is analogous to the different thoughts, emotions and images that appear in the forefront of the mind. In contrast, the insight process is about becoming aware of the formulas within the spreadsheet. These are normally hidden from view, but they are very powerful because they determine how the figures are calculated. This is analogous to the unseen habits that shape our lives.

Like the formulas in the spreadsheet, they lie just below the surface level and are not immediately visible. Once we see them clearly, however, we are no longer under their power. It is like seeing the sleight of hand of a magician. Once we do this then we are no longer taken in by their magical trick. In this case, the seeing is the doing. This is a phrase coined by Krishnamurti. Once we see mental processes clearly, they lose their power. Meditation teacher Robert Burbea describes it as "the seeing that frees"(Burbea, 2014).

Aron Beck, farther of Cognitive Therapy for depression called these unseen habits schemas, which cannot be observed directly but inferred from cognitive patterns in how one views oneself, others and the surrounding environment (Beck et al., 1971). The role of therapist is to help the client discover the underlying schemas governing their thoughts and behaviours. One could argue that the Insight approach is more profound as you do not need a psychologist and can find your way to wisdom just by doing your practice.

With shamatha practice, we learn to stay focused on the present moment, and with vipassana practice we learn to look more deeply at what is showing up in the present moment. This entails an opening and deepening of our awareness to access the subliminal level of mind where "the formulas in the spreadsheet" are lying waiting to be recognised for what they are – mere conditioned responses that lack any real intelligence other than the repetition of past habit. This was the key insight of Rob Nairn, one of the founders of the MA who developed the insight module of the MA (Nairn et al., 2018).

A key practice for facilitating insight is open awareness. This is the practice of allowing our awareness naturally to open so that more and more elements of mental experience come into conscious awareness. The more we do this, the more previously unseen elements of the mind come into view. There are other methods that can be used as part of psychological insight, but I want to focus less on habits and come sooner to insight into nature of mind which is the key focus of Mahamudra and this series of articles. If you want to explore psychological insight in more detail, as practiced in a meditative way, you can refer to the book I co-wrote with Rob Nairn and Heather Regan-Addis, *From Mindfulness to Insight* (Nairn et al., 2018). Generally, insight operates at two levels: seeing clearly what arises in the mind and then recognising the nature of the mind. In Buddhism this is described as first seeing though the obscuring habits of mind and then gaining insight into the mind itself. Thus far we have been looking at the former. Now I want to turn to the latter.

Nature of Mind

In Mahamudra, the focus is on the nature of our mind rather than the ongoing narratives that tend to absorb our attention and consume our energy. Nature of mind refers to the architecture of mental

experience rather than the content of experience. It is more concerned with the processes playing out moment by moment than the stories and sense of meaning that we weave into the architecture of experience. Three aspects of nature of mind are identified: emptiness, awareness and dynamic activity (Table 1).

Table 1 Three Aspects of Nature of Mind.

NATURE OF MIND
EMPTY – our experience is always changing moment by moment; it is ephemeral and ungraspable
AWARE – the knowing quality of mind is always present when we experience things
DYNAMIC – the mind never stops generating thoughts and emotions

Through coming to know the empty, dynamic and aware nature of our own minds we open the door to a state of primordial freedom and peace that lies behind the unsatisfactoriness, confusion and stress (*dukkha*) of everyday life. Now, throughout this series of articles my central argument is that contemporary secular mindfulness practice can take us there. It all depends on our motivation and the depth of our practice. What is important though is our view or basic understanding of mind. This is what I am setting out in the first part of this article. Once the view is in place and so too the motivation, then all we need to do is to practice with sincerity and commitment.

In brief, emptiness refers to the fact that none of our inner experience can be pinned down or conceptualised in any way. It is subtly changing moment by moment – it arises by itself, changes by itself and moves through us by itself. Yet the mind continually forms mental impressions of experience that it clings to. The meditations on emptiness help us see that these mental impressions, though appearing vividly, are mere constructions of mind. They are not inherent to experience which is ever changing and ungraspable. They are a vivid display within awareness.

This brings us to awareness itself. As we discussed in Parts 1 and 2 of this article series, awareness is not limited to dualistic awareness: “I am aware of this or that”. It refers to a space of clarity and knowing that illuminates what is known, much like a light illuminates the contents of a room. The Tibetan term *rigpa* better describes it than the English term “awareness”. A key focus of this Part 3 article and the subsequent Part 4 is to know *rigpa* directly and learning to abide in it.

The dynamic aspect of mind points to the fact that the mind is constantly throwing up thoughts, feelings, images and emotions. It never stops. When we first start meditating, we might cherish the unrealistic hope that our meditation will take us to a place where the mind becomes forever still, spacious and blissful. People often look at monks like myself and think that this is our experience. They could not be further from the truth! The mind never stops throwing things up, sometimes pleasant, other times not. The point being made here is that this is the nature of the mind. Just like the sea always has waves, so too the mind always has thoughts. And just like the sea sometimes has wild and stormy waves, so too does the mind. This is even the experience for enlightened people. The key instruction

here is not to block what arises, but instead to learn the skill of surfing the internal waves of thought and emotion, and so too the external waves of dramas and conflicts.

These three aspects of the nature of mind are the terrain within which we practice. In practice, we focus on emptiness and awareness. They are like the two sides of a coin.

Three Stages of Awareness

Of the three aspects of the nature of mind, we will begin with awareness since it is the bedrock of our practice (Table 2). This model of the three stages of awareness derives from Advaita Vedanta (Potter, 2023). We have found it to be a very useful and practical approach to coming to know awareness directly. Although it derives from the Vedanta tradition it is entirely congruent with the Mahamudra teachings. As a monk within the Kagyu tradition of Tibetan Buddhism, Mahamudra lies at the heart of my practice. Yet is has always puzzled me that there is a very strong focus on emptiness, but less so on awareness. Awareness is always in the background but is not unpacked as clearly as it is done in the three stages of awareness in Advaita. People have pointed out to me that the Dzogchen tradition of Tibetan Buddhism does explicitly focus on awareness, and the term *rigpa* is found in this approach (Dalai Lama, 2020). However, this tradition has not been my area of expertise. For this reason, we draw on the Advaita model in the wisdom module of the MA. Also, we are keen to have an eclectic approach to meditation and not to be over-reliant on Tibetan Buddhism, which is the background of most of our teachers.

Table 2 Three Stages of Awareness

1. Awareness knows and witnesses all experience – dualistic – **mindfulness**
2. All experience arises within the space of awareness – subtly dualistic – **open awareness**
3. All experience is the expression of awareness – nondual – **empty luminosity**

The first stage of awareness relates to mindfulness practice as it is commonly understood. Before encountering mindfulness, many people find that they perpetually lost in thought. Moreover, many of these thoughts are negative, and being held captive by one's thoughts can be a source of ongoing stress and suffering. One might think of someone suffering in this way who stumbles upon an MBLC 8-week course and begins to practise mindfulness. As the course progresses, it begins to dawn on them that they do not have to follow each thought that pops up in their heads. Instead, they can refocus their attention on a neutral anchor in the present moment such as breathing or sound.

In the beginning, because thoughts are so addictive, it is helpful to be a safe distance away from them. A practice like mindfulness of breathing gives one an alternative point of focus, and it also provides some space between the focus on the breathing and all the thoughts popping up in the mind. At this stage, the practice of awareness is dualistic, which is natural at this stage. From the safe space of breathing, we are aware of thoughts taking place at a distance. As the practice progresses, however, the power of awareness grows stronger. Mindfulness practice can yield powerful insights that thoughts are not who we are, and they are not necessarily true. When these insights truly lands in our own experience, they can be a revelation! Yet we are still at an early stage in our journey into awareness.

Before exploring stage two of awareness that is the main focus on this article, it might be helpful to make a distinction between attention and awareness. Often these terms are used interchangeably but they are very different. When one looks at awareness through the lens of the Eastern meditative traditions such as Mahamudra and Advaita, it refers to something vast and limitless like the sky. The practice of open awareness is coming to know this vastness of awareness. And whilst awareness effortlessly reflects the details of our lives like a mirror, for functional reasons we need to home in on these details in order to do things. This results in narrowing our perceptual focus that we can call attention. You need to attend to the words on this page as you read them. Similarly, we need to attend to things like cooking a meal, washing the dishes, listening to someone speak, and many other things. One might say that attention is the messenger of awareness that is like the king or queen. Ideally, the messenger performs its role and then is drawn back into awareness that is its nature. But if we think about our lives, the messenger is so often running wild within the field of experience and has lost touch with the king that is awareness. This is the experience for so many people. It is compounded by modern consumer society that pulls our attention in so many ways and by our addiction to social media.

For this reason, stage one of awareness - mindfulness training - is so important because it is a way taming the messenger and bringing it back to its source which is awareness. The development of mindfulness requires a lot of diligent practice and steady application because our attention, the messenger, has learnt such wild and unruly ways. Yet once the messenger is sufficiently tamed, what is called for is a significant shift in our practice, namely from training attention to coming to recognise and know awareness directly. This is the shift to stage two of awareness training.

The problem is that people often get stuck in stage one and they end up striving too much. This can be a big issue with mindfulness practice. The messenger, attention, has been sufficiently tamed, but people keep working with the support and often end up tightening around it too much. In this way, the spaciousness of meditation can be blocked. You can often see this in people’s faces when they meditate.

There is an earnestness and seriousness in them. It is like they are in a private, inner world battling with thoughts and earnestly regulating their emotions. People can get stuck in stage one and find it hard to move onto open awareness practice because meditation has become associated with attention training.

On Duty / Off Duty

The practice of on duty/off duty is an antidote to this tendency. I was first exposed to this practice about 12 years ago by a Tibetan teacher called Khenpo Lhabu. He is a traditional Tibetan teacher who does not mince his words and is very straight talking. I recall him once saying, "Face it, you Westerners do not have a clue when it comes to meditation. Either you become too tight and serious about it and tense up, or you space out and get lost in thought. Also, you think you can meditate for 45 min or an hour at a time. This is not the way to do it. You just meditate for a few minutes and then let go of any effort and then alternate between meditation and non-meditation."

The idea of non-meditation is a key theme in the Tibetan tradition. The idea is to regularly intersperse periods of meditating using a method (on-duty) with times when you let go of any method and rest at ease without any focus (off-duty). When I started teaching this method, it was a revelation. People often remarked that off-duty or non-meditation felt like true meditation, and they were less bothered by thoughts. People said they felt more spacious and at ease, more present and awake. Also, when they went on-duty again and practised the meditation they were used to doing, there was more spaciousness and less striving. Alternating between the two had a balancing effect on their meditation.

This practice approach is best suited to a workshop or retreat context, in which the facilitator guides the on-duty stage and then rings a gong to invite people to go off-duty. This is followed by an inquiry with participants exploring their experience of the switch-over from on-duty to off-duty. It is generally during the inquiry that most of the learning and insights occur. Nevertheless, let's try it out here and see how it goes.

Practice: On Duty / Off Duty

Set the timer on a smartphone or another device for 4 to 5 min. Sit in an upright and grounded way, closely attending to your breathing as a mindfulness support, without it becoming tight. When thoughts arise notice them and return to your breathing. This is the stage of on-duty where we practice mindfulness of breathing. When the timer sounds, go off-duty. Let go of trying to meditate and just sit where you are, relaxing slightly in your posture. If your eyes were closed in the on-duty stage, you should now open them. You can look around, noticing people and things in the room where you are sitting and hearing sounds, but without any sense of needing to do anything. This includes not using any meditation method. Don't worry about thoughts. When you come on-duty again you can attend to them. When the timer sounds after 2

min, go back on-duty and repeat the practice sequence of moving between on-duty for 4 to 5 min and off-duty for 2 min. Continue for as long as you choose.

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/

Through doing this practice we realise that meditation can be very simple. By letting go of the mindfulness method and the striving to achieve something, off-duty drops one into the space of open awareness. We find ourself in the lap of the king, and all we need do is simply rest there. It is important to train our attention not to get lost in thought. This is the phase of on-duty. But once the mind is settled and the messenger has returned to the king, all we need to do is just show up and be present. This is the phase of off-duty. In doing so, the presence of awareness reveals itself to us. We do not need to do anything special. We do not need to train awareness to meditate any more than we need to teach the sun how to shine. All that is now called for is simply to recognise awareness for what it is and abide in it. This is the key shift from stage one to stage two.

The simplicity of this transition makes it difficult and that is why the practice of off-duty is so helpful for people. In many ways it is like a trick that drops people into open awareness without them realising it. It is also helpful to have a structure – generally we recommend 4 min on and 2 min off. This can help people get used to recognising and resting in awareness for short stints. It is like tasting freedom momentarily. Also, people do not need to worry if they get lost in thought because they will come on-duty soon and "deal with" the distracting thoughts.

What the non-meditation phase of off-duty reveals is that awareness is not a dualistic process of "me aware of this or that". This is an ego-based form of awareness in which the sense of I is conflated with awareness. Instead, awareness is the space within which experience arises, much like the sky with thoughts and emotions like clouds passing through the sky.

In the early stages of meditation, thoughts and emotions are very addictive, and we need to be a safe distance away from them. But now that our attention is more stable and under our control, thoughts and emotions are less sticky, and we can come closer to them again. There is a natural sense of opening up around our inner experience such that awareness becomes like a warm and loving container for the inner movement of our emotional feeling world. The practice of self-compassion from the Part 2 article helps this process, too. The practice of off-duty gives us a felt sense of this natural opening of awareness and coming close to experience again. We then build on this with the next practice.

Resting in the Midst

Open awareness practice has two stages. The first stage is focused on experience and the second on awareness itself. To make this distinction clear, think of a clear mountain pool as a metaphor for the mind. In the beginning we need to focus on one thing at the bottom of the pool, for example a spherical rock. This helps to steady our attention. This equates to stage one of awareness where we are training our attention to stay in the present moment focused on one thing such as mindfulness of breathing or sound. Once our attention becomes steady and focused there is a natural opening of awareness to include everything else in the pond, namely other rocks and shrubs and fish swimming about. This is the entry point to stage two of awareness practice, namely open awareness. At this stage, all of our thoughts, sensations and emotions become the focus. There is a Tibetan prayer that describes this stage: "Grant your blessing that I may be free from the idea of something to meditate on and everything in my experience becomes the meditation" (Dorje Chang prayer). The next stage in open awareness is to become aware of the water in the pond, which is the practice of being aware of being aware. We come to this in Part 4 of this article series. This is also the focus of the wisdom module in the MA.

In the MA approach, we describe open awareness focused on experience as "resting in the midst of your experience". This practice naturally follows on from off-duty. We maintain the spaciousness and non-striving quality of off-duty. In effect, off-duty or non-meditation now *becomes* the practice. Off-duty gives us the clue that meditation can be very simple. All we need to do is show up and be present. Yet we maintain a sense of freshness and vividness to this awareness. This is the subtle difference between off-duty and resting in the midst. Off-duty can imply a tuning out and switching off, but this practice is to be vividly present and awake to whatever shows up in our experience. It is also important to remain grounded in the body and accept whatever we are feeling from moment to moment. We are not spacing out into a fantasy world. We are fully rooted in ourselves and open to the full range of our inner experience. Whatever we are feeling, whether good or bad, becomes the practice. All we do is be fully present in our experience and relax into it.

In my experience, people really enjoy this practice because it gives them the message that whatever they are feeling is okay and part of the practice and all they need to do is accept and relax into what they are feeling. We also tell people that all the methods they have learnt before are lying around them on the floor – symbolically speaking – and they can pick them up at any time. For example, the methods of mindfulness of breathing, acceptance, self-compassion and gratitude are there to be used as and when they feel the need, but the default practice is resting in the midst.

Practice: Resting in the Midst

Start by placing your body in a posture that is alert, dignified and at ease. Then form an intention for your practice, for example, to be present in a kind way that brings you home to your essential nature that is at peace and free. Then reflect on your motivation for practising, for example, how you might hope to benefit yourself and others through doing your practice.

Pay attention to the natural flow of your breathing. You might notice that your breathing naturally deepens when you sense its natural rhythm and flow in your body. You might also notice that your centre of gravity drops more fully into the body - mind resting in the body, body resting on the ground. Maintain a light focus on your breathing as a support while maintaining an awareness of your body as a whole resting on your seat or cushion.

When your mind begins to settle and you are less distracted by thoughts, let breathing move to the background of your experience and rest in the midst of whatever is occurring in your experience right now. Instead of breathing being your focal support, there is a light and expansive focus on everything that is occurring in your experience.

Alternatively, you can move directly to the practice or resting in the midst from the practice of off-duty we did before…..

See if you can open up to the space around you by becoming aware of sounds and then rest loosely in the midst of what you are experiencing now – noticing thoughts, feelings and sensations. Cultivate a sense of gentle curiosity, being receptive and open to your experience in this moment – not holding onto anything, nor pushing anything away.

Gently tune into your emotional feeling world, sensing where feelings such as anxiety or tension, or wellbeing and joy, might be held within your body and see if you allow whatever is present to arise and move through you in its own way. You can gently say yes to whatever is arising – and then rest in the midst of what you are experiencing.

If you find that your attention starts drifting off into thinking and distraction, bring breathing to the foreground and focus lightly on it as a mindfulness support. When your mind settles again, let breathing move to the background and rest in the midst of your experience as it is now. Nothing to do, nowhere to go and nothing to achieve.

As a way of ending your practice session, you can do a short sharing. See if you can return to your basic motivation of extending the benefit of your practice to others. Find your own way of expressing this, for example something like: "through the power of practising in this way may I cultivate awareness with

compassion at its heart and carry this into my life through the way I live and touch the lives of others in ever expanding circles".

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Touching Emptiness

So far we have been exploring open awareness. This is one aspect of nature of mind. Another aspect is emptiness. Awareness and emptiness are like the two sides of the same coin, so it is always important to practice both aspects. We will now turn to emptiness. The reason for meditating on it is to unpick the seeming solidity of our inner experience and see mind processes for what they are: ephemeral, ever-changing and elusive.

Here, we are adopting the Mahamudra approach in how we are practising emptiness. This approach looks inward at the mind to recognise its empty nature and is less concerned with understanding the emptiness of external phenomena. This is because our own minds are always available for us to look into and when we discern emptiness here it is immediately verifiable as a felt experience. From a modern neuroscience perspective, this emphasis on the mind as the most available object for investigation is neurobiologically sound because all perceptions and cognitions emerge from neural activity, and so observing the mind directly examines the very mechanisms by which all experience is generated.

The way of looking inward employs a non-conceptual intelligence called *prajna*. It is similar to what is understood by the term "curiosity" in secular mindfulness. We look again and again at thoughts, emotions and perceptions in a very direct and immediate way by following a series of open inquiries that seek to uncover their fleeting, ephemeral, and non-solid nature.

What emptiness meditation is trying to lay bare is how the mind constructs narratives and stories based on what is fleeting and ephemeral. We then fixate on these narratives and cling to them, and this can cause a great deal of suffering because our fixation is at odds with the nature of things which is all flux and change. The meditation on emptiness helps to loosen this tight fixation and solid imputation, and this can ease our suffering; but more importantly for our purposes it brings us closer to the primordial ground of our being that is nondual awareness or *rigpa*.

The practice of resting in the midst opens up the space of inner experience, and with it there is a growing inclusiveness, acceptance and friendliness towards the movement of our inner experience. This

creates the conditions for looking more closely at the architecture of experience – what exactly is going on in our minds from moment to moment. We are focused more on the underlying processes rather than the content of our inner narratives and mind dramas.

We begin by noticing how all experience in the mind arises by itself. All sensations, emotions, thoughts and perceptions arise due to multiple causes and conditions that we can never fully track. For example, an anxious feeling might arise for no particular reason, or due to a range of different triggers. It is not as if we sat down and planned our inner landscape of feeling by thinking: "I will start off feeling calm and peaceful today, then by morning tea I might introduce some anxiety to spice up my day followed by agitation all afternoon and wild panic in the evening". Things just arise by themselves.

Also, we notice that as soon as things arise, they change moment by moment. Nothing stands still even for an instant. We might remark to a friend that "I am feeling low right now", but if we look at what the term "low" refers to in our experience, it is an everchanging mix of feelings, thoughts and energy level that is changing moment by moment. What we quickly come to see is that no concept of label describes anything we think or feel in any moment. It might roughly describe our experience, but if we look more closely, we see that concepts are very clumsy and come nowhere near describing our feeling state in any moment.

This is one meaning of emptiness: our experience is "empty" of the concepts and labels we apply to it in the sense that they are clumsy and inaccurate. Emptiness is a way of unpicking the self-limiting beliefs that often imprison us and point to the fact that who we really are is much more rich, changeable and vast than the way we tend to see ourselves. This is the other meaning of emptiness: any one manifestation in life is "full" of the whole universe in the sense that everything is interconnected. Initially, the realisation that all our concepts are very limited is scary but then it becomes liberating. We might come to see that we have spent our whole lives trying to figure ourselves out but now we see that this is impossible! We are a mystery to ourselves.

A useful metaphor that describes emptiness is a mist settling in a valley. The mist is analogous to our changing moods and feeling states. We might make loose assumptions about a mist that has settled in the valley of our mind. But if we look closely, we cannot determine where the mist came from. It did not roll over from another valley into our valley. It just arose due to many causes and conditions. Once the mist is in the valley, it is clearly perceptible but if we look closely at it, we cannot determine its borders or edges and if we try to take hold of it, we just grab thin air. Yet it vividly appears. Furthermore, we cannot pinpoint the moment the mist disappears. It just vanishes due to changing causes and conditions. All mind states and emotions are similar.

The key inquiry in Mahamudra is to try look for where things came from, where they abide and where they go. The instruction is to look at experience like this in real time again and again. It is important not to come to a quick intellectual conclusion but to keep looking, even though we do not find anything. When we do this again and again the solidity of experience begins to collapse but the vividness remains. We soon discover that we cannot identify where experience arose from, we cannot pinpoint or take hold of it as it arises, and we cannot pinpoint where it goes. In Mahamudra language, all experience "self-arises and self-liberates". When one begins to get a sense of this experientially, it is very liberating because all we need to do is step back and let the drama of mind happen by itself. We see for ourselves that it is not personal, and we are not in control.

In practice this is not so easy. An example cited in some Buddhist texts is that of seeing a snake curled up into a knot on the path in front of us. It might be tempting to try to help the snake uncoil itself, but in all likelihood it will bite us. All that is called for is to pause, be present and let if uncoil itself, whereupon it will slither off into the undergrowth. The same applies to mind processes. Witnessing the self-arising and self-liberating nature of experience can help us step back, relax and take things less personally. This then deepens the practice of resting in the midst. In this way the practices of emptiness and awareness reinforce one another.

The effect of emptiness meditation is that one experiences directly the changing, ephemeral and non-solid nature of mind experience. We see how the sense of solidity and heaviness is something we manufacture. It is not to be found in experience itself. In a very direct and experiential way we come to see that all experience is nonarising or unborn. These are Mahamudra terms meaning that nothing tangible or real ever comes into existence. This is quite a radical statement. All that arises is an *impression* of anger or sadness or despair, for example, not something tangible and distinct. All our emotions come to be felt and experienced as empty impressions, yet they still vividly appear like the mist in the valley. All that can be identified to be present is clear awareness. This is something we develop more in Part 4 of this article series.

The emptiness approach is not a cure all and it does not mean that things vanish into nothingness. It is pointing out that things are much more elusive and ephemeral than we take them to be. It is still important to relate skilfully and compassionately to ourselves and others. It is important to balance the wisdom with the compassion. Furthermore, it is always important to maintain the practice of shamatta. This calls for steady mindful presence along with self-kindness. It is important that our inner vessel of body and mind is steady and safely held as we go deeper into the probing, exploratory practices of vipassana.

Practice: Mist in the Valley

Begin by doing the practice of resting in the midst as described above. Once your mind begins to feel settled and open, notice how there is always a unique feeling state occurring within you at any moment. Can you detect where your feeling state in this moment came from? Often we think we can, but when we look closely we cannot. It is like a mist that rolls into a valley. It arises due to many causes and conditions. Can you sense where this feeling state is occurring right now? Is it taking place in particular part of your body, and if so, where? If you home in on what you are feeling, can you identify exactly what you are feeling and where it is occurring? Or is it elusive and constantly changing? This is like trying to take hold of a mist in a valley; it is vividly present, but when you try to grab hold of it you grab thin air. Can you sense where this feeling state you are experiencing goes? Does it make a distinct departure, like someone leaving a room, or does it just disappear or morph into another feeling state? This is like the mist in the valley that just vanishes due to changing conditions. By following this inquiry, we can see for ourselves that we cannot pinpoint or take hold of our inner experience in any way. Everything arises by itself, changes by itself and moves through us by itself. What is it like to step back, rest in the midst of your experience, and just let this happen?

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/

Conclusion

As soon as one sits on a cushion or chair and turns one's attention inwards to become curious about one's own mind in a direct and experiential way, one becomes a practitioner and enters the path of awareness. In general the term "mindfulness" refers to this conscious turning towards experience with acceptance and curiosity and coming to know awareness. In my experience, both as a practitioner and teacher, once we start the journey the genie is then out of the bottle, and we cannot put it back. Yet we can limit the path of awareness by making if focused on stress reduction, health improvement or low mood. There is nothing wrong with this and whatever benefits comes from it are to be applauded. The only problem is that the full potential of mindfulness might not be realised if our view is limited. If instead our view, or intention, is to fully come to know the mind – the nature of the mind rather than its content – then there is a natural movement in that direction as realising the nature of the mind is available to everyone.

This series of articles is exploring how secular mindfulness naturally goes in the direction of realising the nature of the mind and experiencing directly the peace and freedom described by the great mystics of old. What this series is trying to do is identify the key perspectives and stages that facilitate this

process and doing so in a way that draws on ancient traditions like Advaita and Mahamudra without thinking that one needs to become a religious adherent. In the next article we continue the exploration of emptiness and awareness and how open awareness practice naturally moves into nondual awareness, or empty luminosity as it is described in Mahamudra.

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