



Mahamudra and Mindfulness Series

Part 4: Wisdom

This is the fourth part of a series of articles exploring how the practice of mindfulness can be guided by the Mahamudra teachings of Tibetan Buddhism. Parts 1, 2 and 3 of this series have been published in the February, May and July 2025 issues of this journal, respectively (Choden, 2025a,b,c).

I have argued throughout this series that there is an inbuilt trajectory to mindfulness practice that naturally takes us back to the truth of who we are. In Mahamudra this is called “recognising the nature of mind”. This recognition is not dependent on spiritual tradition and orthodoxy but on the sincerity of our motivation and the depth of our practice. As the spiritual teacher Krishnamurti once remarked, “truth is a pathless land”. It is there for all to discover.

In the previous three articles we laid the building blocks for this final stage of the journey. I have followed the trajectory of the Mindfulness Association (MA) approach which sets this out in four stages: mindfulness, compassion, insight and wisdom. The first three articles corresponded to mindfulness, compassion and insight. This final article corresponds to wisdom.

As a way of contextualising the practices in this article it will be helpful to revisit the diagram of the three aspects of mind’s nature discussed in Part 3 article (Table 1) including emptiness, awareness and dynamic activity. They are the key features of Mahamudra practice – in particular emptiness and awareness, which can be viewed as the two sides of the same coin.

Table 1 Three Aspects of Mind’s Nature

EMPTY – Our experience is ever changing every moment; it is ungraspable and ephemeral
AWARE – The knowing is the quality of mind that is always present in all our experiences
DYNAMIC – The mind is continuously producing thoughts and generating emotions

It will also be helpful to revisit the diagram of the three stages of awareness because the practice of awareness is a central focus of this article. This model derives from Advaita Vedanta. The first stage relates to mindfulness practice, the second stage to open awareness practice and the third stage to nondual awareness (Table 2).

Table 2 Three Awareness Stages

1. Awareness knows and is aware of all experiences: dualistic (mindfulness)
2. The space of awareness encompasses all experiences: subtly dualistic (open awareness)
3. All experiences manifest as the display of awareness: nondual (empty luminosity)

Revisiting Open Awareness

In the Part 3 article, we explored the practice of open awareness by doing two practices: *on duty/off duty* and *resting in the midst*. The first practice allows us to make the shift from mindfulness practice focused on training our attention using a focal support like breathing to simply being present and aware without any agenda. The instruction to go “off-duty” relaxes any striving to meditate and gives us the experience of spaciousness and freedom. This is the key shift from mindfulness to open awareness. The practice of *resting in the midst* builds on this experience. We are encouraged to be open and accepting of whatever occurs for us in the moment – whether this be agitation or peace, anxiety or joy, sadness or happiness – and simply to abide in the midst of it. Whereas the off-duty practice carries the danger of switching off, here the instruction is to switch on and be fully present and awake in the midst of thoughts, emotions, and sensations without striving for any goal other than to be present and aware.

A helpful analogy is gazing into a mountain pool. The first stage of awareness training is to focus on one thing at the bottom of the pond, say a pebble or rock. This helps to stabilise our attention. Once our attention is stable the next stage is to open up to everything else in the pond of the mind: pebbles, plant life and fish swimming about. This is the practice of *resting in the midst* which has an inclusive quality where everything in our experience becomes the meditation. It corresponds to the first stage of open awareness which is focused more on experience than awareness itself and is about being okay with resting in the midst of whatever is arising for us in the moment. The next stage of open awareness is to become aware of the water in the pond. Here water is an analogy for awareness itself. This stage of open awareness

is focused more on awareness than experience. It involves becoming aware of being aware and then resting in awareness. This is a key focus of this article.

This practice brings us into the territory of recognising the nature of mind. This is a term used in the Mahamudra tradition for coming to know directly the primordial nature of our being that has always been at peace, free and perfect in itself no matter what dramas and issues have assailed us in life.

Simply Being

A simple access point to recognising awareness – the water in the pond – is sensing the quality of simply being as we sit and meditate. Sometimes we might not recognise the profundity of this experience because it is so simple and ever present. So, we start by becoming more curious about awareness than what we are aware of. This is something we seldom do in ordinal life, or even when we meditate, because awareness is always focused on something else. Also, we tend to conflate awareness with “I” or “me” and what we are aware of as “other”.

What we mean by “simply being” is the felt experience of aliveness in the body. Whatever we might be experiencing – sadness, anxiety, joy, boredom or excitement – there is always a quality of beingness or aliveness that lies behind these emotions and animates them. This is not something we tend to focus on. We tend to fixate on the experience itself which is understandable. But here the invitation is to drop behind the manifesting emotion or feeling and to sense the quality of beingness that is always there. We lean more into this quality of presence than the content of the experience.

A useful analogy is the fact that all drinks contain water as their main constituent property. Yet we seldom focus on the water but tend to fixate on the drink. For example, we might say, “this is an excellent tea or great coffee I am drinking”. We take the water completely for granted. Yet it constitutes 99% of the tea or coffee. In this practice we focus more on the water than the tea or coffee. But we appreciate the tea or coffee too, so it is a win-win approach. By taking this approach, we might say to our fellow diners at a banquet, “I am really enjoying this water taking the form of tea”. Very likely, the others will look at you somewhat oddly!

Just like we focus more on the water than the tea or coffee, we focus more on the awareness than how it presents itself in the form of feelings and perceptions. In so doing, we might come to notice that the quality of beingness or presence has a consistent, stable quality while the presenting feelings and perceptions are always in a state of flux and change. Once we connect to this quality within ourselves, the next step is to sense this same quality of aliveness and presence in things outside ourselves, like being in

nature and sensing it in birds and trees and the wildness all around. This is wonderfully expressed in the poem quoted below. This is an entry point into the practice of being aware of being aware. Let's do a practice after you read an extract from this poem.

Hokusai says look carefully.

He says pay attention, notice.

He says keep looking, stay curious.

He says there is no end to seeing

He says everything is alive —

shells, buildings, people, fish,

mountains, trees, wood is alive.

Water is alive.

Everything has its own life,

Everything lives inside us.

He says live with the world inside you.

He says it doesn't matter if you draw,

or write books. It doesn't matter

if you saw wood or catch fish.

It doesn't matter if you sit at home

and stare at the ants on your veranda

or the shadows of the trees

and grasses in your garden.

It matters that you care.

It matters that you feel.

It matters that you notice.

It matters that life lives through you.....

by Roger Keyes (1990)

Practice: Simply Being

Start by placing your body in a posture that is alert 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. [these first three paragraphs are the preliminaries that will be repeated in the practices below]

Now see if you can become more curious about awareness that what you are aware of. See if you can sense the presence of awareness in your body as a quality of simply being. If you are feeling anxious or sad, angry or joyful, notice how there is a quality of presence that lies behind these feelings. You can sense it as an aliveness in your body. See if you can lean more into this aliveness and presence than the actual feelings themselves. Just rest in this felt quality of simple presence and aliveness that you feel in your body. Then once you get up from your meditation see if you can sense this same quality of beingness and aliveness in other people, animals and nature.

[this dedication paragraph that will be repeated in the practices below] 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". Once you finish this practice spend 5 minutes or so journaling what you noticed.

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

Natural Clarity

When we become curious about awareness another thing we might notice is its quality of effortless knowing. Just like a mirror effortlessly reflects any images that fall upon it, so too awareness effortlessly reflects all perceptions of our senses. For example, if your eyes are closed and you then open them, there is an immediate experience of visual perception that occurs without any effort or volition on your part. It

is vivid and fully manifest. The term used in Mahamudra is “natural clarity”. This is something we take for granted. So, the invitation is to recognise this moment and stay there a little longer before the thinking intercedes with all its ideas and thoughts about what we are seeing. This is the experience of non-conceptual knowing that very quickly gives way to the conceptual thinking that tends to dominate our lives. Similarly, auditory perception happens without any effort on our part, and the same applies for each of the other senses. Inwardly, at the level of interoception, there is also a vivid display of sensation and emotion that occurs without any effort or volition.

When it comes to practice, we are invited to lean more into the vividness and clarity of experience than the content of what we are thinking, feeling or perceiving and to stay a little longer in the space of non-conceptual knowing. This is not easy because it requires a lot of stability in our meditation practice, which is why it is so important for shamatha to be stable before we practice vipassana. It is remarkable to reflect on the fact that this effortless knowing or natural clarity happens by itself both externally and internally, and that we seldom pause to savour it in our lives because of the hegemony of the thinking mind.

In Mahamudra language, effortless knowing is called the natural state for the simple reason that it arises by itself without any direct input on our part. The invitation in Mahamudra is to appreciate and linger a little longer in the natural state of simple being and effortless knowing because this is where the most profound truth about who we are is to be found. This is an experiential truth that gradually begins to reveal itself to us in its own time and its own way. This is what is meant by the phrase, “the Buddha is hiding in plain sight in the ordinary awareness of the everyday mind.” The most profound is right here in simple being and effortless knowing but we need to recognise it for what it is and stay there long enough for it to reveal its qualities to us. Since this journey is an experiential one it is good to do the practice of effortless knowing and link it to the first practice of simply being.

Practice: Effortless Knowing

[Preliminaries as above] Once again see if you can become more curious about awareness than what you are aware of. Can you notice how knowing just happens by itself? If you open your eyes there is the immediate experience of visual perception without any effort on your part. The same applies to hearing. Turning inwards there is an immediate experience of sensation and feeling without any effort on your part, too. This is the natural clarity of awareness. See if you can linger in this non-conceptual space of vividness and presence. Without blocking thoughts, ideas and images, just let them come and go. But see if you can lean more into the freshness and vividness of

awareness than the thinking and narratives that occur within awareness. [Dedication as above].

Once you finish this practice spend 5 minutes or so journaling what you noticed.

Revisiting Emptiness

It will be useful now to view the two practices we have just done through the lens of emptiness. This is because we always practice Mahamudra within the context of the three aspects of nature of mind: emptiness, awareness and dynamic activity. In this article, I mainly focus on the interaction between emptiness and awareness.

Emptiness (*śūnyatā*) describes how things exist in a fundamentally different way than we typically perceive them. This teaching points to two interrelated insights: Nothing exists independently, and everything arises through causes and conditions. A wooden table exists only through the convergence of trees, rain, sunshine, the carpenter's labour, tools, and countless other factors. Remove any of these conditions, and the table cannot exist. This is what Buddhists mean by "empty of inherent existence" - the table has no independent, self-contained essence. Everything is impermanent and processual – all phenomena are constantly arising, changing, and dissolving at every level from subatomic particles to galaxies. What we call a "table" is actually a dynamic process appearing stable only because change occurs at different timescales. The atoms vibrate, the wood slowly decays, and nothing remains static. We mentally carve up the seamless flow of experience into discrete "things" for practical purposes. But where does the table truly end and the floor begin at the molecular level? Our labels and categories are useful tools, but they do not reflect absolute boundaries in nature itself. Therefore, phenomena are simultaneously empty of fixed, independent existence and full of dynamic relationships with everything else. The table is not a separate entity but a temporary pattern in the universal web of relationships - a unique expression of the total system, just as a wave is a temporary formation of the ocean itself.

The problem we run into with the two practices we have just done is that the immediacy and simplicity of the experience of being aware is obscured by the fact that we conflate awareness with "I" and what we are aware of with "other". In Buddhism this artificial separation between self and other is described as ignorance; and learning to see through it is described as awakening. This is aptly described in the following extract from the Mahamudra Prayer by the great Tibetan master, the 3rd Karmapa (Tai Situpa, 2002):

"All phenomena are the illusory display of mind.

There is no mind; it is empty of an essence.

Empty and unceasing, it appears as anything whatsoever.

Investigating this thoroughly, may be ascertain the ground.

Our non-existent projections are mistaken to be objects

Through ignorance, *intrinsic awareness is mistaken to be a self.*

Through clinging to this duality, we wander within samsara.

May we cut the root of ignorance and confusion.” (the italics above are my own).

Where is “I” to be found?

The first thing to explore is the fact that “intrinsic awareness is mistaken to be a self.” This points to how we automatically take possession of the experience of awareness as being “I” or “me”. This would not be a problem if the sense of “I” was experienced as an open expression of awareness that included all of life. In contrast, the sense of “I” is often turned inwards, contracted and experienced as separate from what is perceived to be other. In Buddhism this is described as ego-clinging. It is often said that all Buddhist practice is aimed at counteracting ego-clinging and the negative emotions that feed it.

Another term that is used in Buddhist texts is the reified I. This refers to how we not only identify with awareness as being “I”, but we also make it solid and real like a thing. The experience of “I” can feel very solid and weighed down when it is charged with strong emotions, such as anger or anxiety. This contraction around awareness to be “I” or “me”, which feels solid, and the sense of separation from what is other is the very root of ignorance in Buddhism.

A way of penetrating ignorance is to step behind the reification process and notice that what we take to be “I” is in fact the experience of awareness that is entirely free, intangible and not personal. One might say that this awareness is *empty* of all the different guises of ego-clinging because they are all temporary mental constructions that obscure the basic truth of the intrinsic awareness that lies at the core of our being as an unchanging reality. Going back to our analogy of water and drinks, they are like the many different kinds of drinks we fixate on, but the true nature of experience always remains the water or the awareness.

The *Lojong* teachings of Tibetan Buddhism (also known as the *Seven Points of Mind Training*) contain short phrases that help one reflect on the truth of things (Jamgon Kontrul, 2000). One such phrase is to “examine unborn awareness”. What this means is that we are invited to step behind the armouring of our ego defences and notice how the experience of awareness is not personal or bound up in any way by multiple expressions of ego but is a primordial experience of being and knowing. “Unborn” in this

context means that it does not result from causes and conditions but is inherently present. This is precisely what the first two practices are inviting us to do. We touch the simplicity of simply being and effortless knowing before the drama of self is constructed on top of it. The practice of awareness guides us towards recognising the simplicity of this state and the practice of emptiness helps to unmask the different guises of ego that obscure this simple state. Let's do a practice that helps to connect this to our experience.

Practice: Where is "I" to be found?

[Preliminaries as above] Rest in the space of simple being and effortless knowing. Notice how the sense of "I" and "me" is always present and how we conflate "I" with awareness: I am aware of this sensation, I am aware of this thought. Now gently turn inwards: can you locate "I"? Does it have a tangible presence like a shape or form? Does it have a texture, shape or colour? Keep looking again and again. If you cannot find anything, what do you notice instead? Perhaps a continuity of being aware. Just rest in this continuity of being aware. Just rest in the space of simple being and effortless knowing.

If you notice any contraction within your body around "I" and "me" – what we call the reified I – bring some self-kindness: soften around the feelings of tightness and contraction, perhaps breathing into them on the in-breath and breathing out from them on the out-breath. Once again rest in the space of simple being and effortless knowing felt as an aliveness in the body and a natural clarity [Dedication as above]. Once you finish this practice spend 5 minutes or so journaling what you noticed.

Becoming a Child of Illusion

The second key point in the extract from the Mahamudra Prayer quoted above is the assertion that "our non-existent projections are mistaken to be objects." This is a radical statement and derives from the Yogacara or Mind Only school of Emptiness (Hopkins, 2003). This was one of the major schools of emptiness in the 4th century BCE founded by the great masters Asanga and Vasubandhu. Their view was that all we ever know is our experience of mind and what we take to be external reality is a projection of the mind. It is something we construct within the mind based on what we perceive through the senses and which we then project outwards as reality. According to this view, things are not out there, they are "in here" – hence the term Mind Only. Outer reality is described as empty because it is a projection of the mind and so it does not have inherent existence in and of itself.

Intriguingly, some neuroscientists make exactly the same point. Anil Seth, a leading British neuroscientist, argues that what we take to be the external world is an ongoing 3D movie produced by the brain (Seth, 2021). Like many other neuroscientists, he makes the point that the brain predicts reality from moment to moment to create an inner representation of what we take to be outside, and it then makes subtle alterations to these predictions based on what we perceive with our sense faculties. So, just like the Mind Only school, the experience of the world happens in the brain (or the mind), and we can never be certain of what is truly out there.

The Middle Way school of Emptiness (Madhyamaka) founded by the Indian Buddhist monk Nagarjuna, which came to prominence in the 2nd and 3rd century CE, took the Mind Only view further by arguing that not only is outer reality empty but so too the perceiving mind (Siderits and Katsura, 2013).

Nagarjuna exposed the subtle assumption of the Mind Only that mind is real and true. This view is also shared by mainstream neuroscientists, including people like Seth (2021) who imply that the brain is the master of experience and so if we fully understand brain processes we might crack the hard problem of consciousness - the challenge of explaining why and how physical processes in the brain give rise to subjective experiences such as seeing the colour blue or feeling pain.

Nagarjuna countered the Mind Only school by arguing that mind is empty in the same way that outer phenomena are empty. He even went further and argued that emptiness is empty of being empty too! What this means is that we need to let go of emptiness when it has done its job of unmasking the various guises of ego and initiated us into the mystery of interdependence, and we need to resist the temptation of conceptualising it or turning it into a religious creed. So Middle Way leaves us nowhere to stand, and it stops us from taking a fixed position. It drops us into a space of profound groundlessness that is both scary and liberating. It points out that all phenomena, both inner and outer, and the magical display of interdependence, and we cannot take hold of anything as being solid and real anywhere.

What is fascinating is that some neuroscience approaches take a Middle Way approach, too. One example is Donald Hoffman. In his seminal book, *The Case Against Reality* (2020), he argues that external reality is a fiction that we can never come to know directly (Hoffman, 2020). Based on extensive research into visual perception, he argues that our senses evolved to maximise adaption to the environment by getting the resources we need for survival. They did not evolve to see the truth of what is out there in the world because this would take too much time and energy, neither of which are useful for survival. He argues further that space and time are not real in any absolute sense; they are merely an interface specific to our species. The analogy he uses for this interface is a computer screen. Objects we think we are

perceiving outside are in fact icons on this screen. They are not real in and of themselves but merely representations in our brain.

He uses the example of an email icon on our desktop which gives us access to our email client (Hoffman, 2020). We do not need to know all the background algorithms and programming. All we need to know is how to click on the icon and open up our Gmail programme and then do our admin tasks of sending and receiving emails. Similarly, we too are like icons on the desktop of the computer screen and much of our inner biology is complex and unknown to us. Yet this is not important. From an evolutionary point of view, we just need to know enough about ourselves to survive and flourish in our environment.

This is very much like a Middle Way approach to emptiness. What we take to be things outside are icons on the desktop of our mind, and what we take to be self is an icon, too. Even the desktop has no intrinsic truth and is an interface for our species. As with the Middle Way approach, we are left with nowhere to stand.

This has powerful implications for the practice we have been doing, namely simple being and effortless knowing. We have seen that when we open our eyes visual perception happens by itself, and there is a natural clarity and vividness to what we see. The same applies to hearing and feeling. As we have identified, however, an automatic separation happens, too. We think that what we see is “other” and so too what we hear. But, drawing on the Mind Only school and the neuroscience that supports it, things are not other or separate; they are in fact the display of our very own awareness.

And when we turn inwards to what we take to be our sense of self, according to Middle Way and the neuroscience that supports it, there is nothing solid or tangible to be found here either. What we touch is the intrinsic awareness at the core of our being and whatever we experience – sights, sounds, thoughts, emotions and sensations – is the display of this self-same awareness. Experience is both empty of self and empty of other. Touching this truth even momentarily can be liberating.

It can be interesting to sit and meditate with the view that what you are seeing and hearing is not something outside of you, but the display of your very own awareness – viewing your mind as a movie projector and so-called outer reality as a 3D movie. Both the Mahamudra and Lojong teachings draw us into this space of perception by inviting us to regard all phenomena as dreams. This helps to remove the sense of a solid and separate other. It is not at all easy to maintain this level of practice but touching it again and again and learning gradually to integrate it into our practice is very helpful.

Furthermore, we even see the inner workings of our emotional life as something separate and other. People often talk about emotions and mind states as if they are entities within that afflict their sense

of self. Many third-wave psychotherapy approaches use the language of parts to describe our inner community of selves. Whilst this can be helpful at one level in working skilfully with the different aspects of ourselves, there is always the danger polarising and solidifying these different parts. It can be a radical shift to see all of our inner life as the unique display of the self-same intrinsic awareness at the core of our being.

A useful practice is to be like a child of illusion. This comes from the Lojong teachings. It introduces a sense of lightness and playfulness. Just as a child might walk about and see things with wonder and vividness, in a similar way we might walk about and see things as the magnificent display of our own intrinsic awareness. This is similar to the notion of beginner's mind that is a popular term used in secular mindfulness teachings. Likewise, we keep this sense of freshness and openness as we experience things, but the added element is emptiness. We resist the temptation to see things are not solid and real and 'out there'; we see everything as the display of our very own awareness.

Practice: Child of Illusion

Wander about outside and imagine that everything you see, hear and feel is the display of your own awareness. Instead of things between separate and external, imagine that they are the projection of your own mind. Hold to this view lightly and playfully. Just wonder about with a sense of wonder and awe – like a child who is seeing things for the very first time – and stay in touch with the freshness and vividness of what you see, hear and feel. Try not to form any ideas about what you are perceiving, but when thoughts arise do not block them. Just let them come and go as best you can. Imagine that you are in a 3D movie called your life and just wonder about and enjoy it!

Clinging to Duality

The Mahamudra verse quoted above concludes as follows: "through clinging to this duality we wander in samsara". Put differently, through fixating on an internal sense of self that feels solid and real, and through assuming that things we experience in life lie outside the domain of our minds, we are caught in self-perpetuating conditioning that reinforces this sense of duality more and more until it becomes our reality. This describes how we become trapped in the cycle of samsara (or conditioned existence) in Buddhism. However, when we begin to see through the illusion of duality through the power of vipassana meditation we gradually dispel this confusion and gain access to the sacred realm where we sense the underlying unity that lies behind the rich diversity of experience. In reality, we might only touch this realm sometimes – these are described as meditation experiences – but for most of us the power of conditioning is very strong, and we are likely to fall prey to it many times. Permanently severing the root of ignorance

is a lifetime work, or the work of many lifetimes as it is taught in Buddhism. This is described as meditative realisation.

It is always important to practice compassion and the skilful means alongside this path of wisdom and clear seeing. This means that we are always relating to our experience with kindness. Moreover, we are skilful in how we engage with the deeply ingrained patterns of habit and confusion that we carry within ourselves. In the MA wisdom training we keep reiterating that it is important to have *one foot in each truth*: one foot in the deeper truth of emptiness and awareness where we touch the core of our being where all is well – this is the path of wisdom - and the other foot in our everyday lives where we struggle in all manner of ways and where the response of compassion is called for. It is very important to work on both levels at the same time.

Is the Awareness of Pain in Pain?

Having looked at our experience through the lens of emptiness, we now return to the practice of awareness. The next step in the process is to recognise that awareness is never affected by what we are aware of. Just like a mirror is never stained by what is reflected in it, in a similar way awareness is never tainted by what arises in it. Think of a mirror in a department store and how many people gaze into it every day to see if they look good in the latest fashionable outfit. The mirror does not carry any residue at the end of the day, nor does it feel exhaustion from all the people who have looked into it. Awareness is like this, too.

When you are feeling pain in your body it can be useful to ask yourself whether the awareness that witnesses the pain is itself in pain. Or when you are feeling angry, is the awareness that witnesses the anger itself angry? Or when you are feeling agitated in your mind, is the awareness that witnesses the agitation itself agitated? Then apply the same reflection to every sensation, emotion, thought and mind state you experience. In each case the answer is No. When you reflect on this it is self-evident. Often, when we lead this practice in our MA wisdom retreats and pose these questions, people are very clear that the awareness that witness pain is not in pain, and so forth, and they are puzzled that they never recognised this simple truth before. This truth that is simple yet profound because it points to a big part of ourselves that is always okay no matter what happens to us. The problem is that the awareness is a silent witness that often gets overlooked in the hurly burly of life, but the more we pay attention to it the more prominent it becomes like the full moon emerging from the clouds. Let's do a practice to help this point land more fully in our own experience.

Practice: Is the awareness of pain in pain?

[Preliminaries as above] Be more curious about awareness than what you are aware of. Rest in the space of simple being felt as an alive presence in your body and the natural clarity of effortless knowing. If you notice pain in your body, reflect on whether the awareness which notices it is in pain too? If you become aware of agitated thoughts, is the awareness which notices them agitated? If you notice feelings like sadness, anxiety or excitability, is the awareness that notices them sad, anxious or excitable? What does this tell you? Reflect on how awareness is like mirror which reflects experience but is not stained by it. Lean more into the awareness than what you are aware of [Dedication as above]. Once you finish this practice spend 5 minutes or so journaling what you noticed.

I am the Presence of Awareness

As we come to know awareness more intimately, we begin to sense its qualities. The English term “awareness” tends to be emotionally flat and one dimensional. But when we become curious about awareness, we sense the richness and fullness within it. We start to realise that awareness is completely perfect in and of itself. Nothing needs to be added. It is like appreciating the morning sunshine illuminating a meadow. We cannot add to the experience, all we can do is just appreciate it for what it is. In our MA wisdom retreats, we use group inquiry to explore the qualities of awareness once people have become attuned to it. Qualities that are often named are: feeling at peace, free, unbounded, and whole. Another quality that is named is love. For most people, this awareness is a loving awareness.

What is it then like to say that “I am the presence of awareness that knows and witnesses my life?” Here we shift our locus of identity from the changing experiences of our lives – thoughts, emotions, mind dramas, relationships and issues - to the awareness that notices and witnesses them. This shift is profound. It is the basis of Tibetan deity practices. A deity is an intermediary between our normal dualistic mode of perception and the experience of nondual awareness. Instead of identifying with our body as a biological entity made of flesh and blood, we imagine ourselves as an image of light taking a particular form that is endowed with qualities such as love, compassion, joy and equanimity. This is described as a rainbow body in the deity tradition. It is a beautiful term that points to the fact that our body can be experienced in a non-solid way as a body of awareness that radiates qualities which are symbolised by the colours of a rainbow. The most important part of the process is to make the shift from fixating on the content of our experience, and solidifying our feelings and perceptions, to identifying with ourselves as a body of

awareness endowed with qualities. The deity approach is helpful because it uses visualization to give the mind something to focus on in making this inner shift.

Let's do a practice to explore the shift from identifying with the changing experiences of our lives to the awareness that notices them.

Practice: I am the presence of awareness

[Preliminaries as above] Rest in the space of simple being and effortless knowing. Be curious about awareness and come to know it for yourself. When you pay attention to awareness what qualities do you notice within it? Perhaps you might notice that it always remains at peace, free and unbound no matter what you feel and no matter what arises in your mind. Reflecting more deeply now, when you lean more into awareness than what you are aware of, what qualities do you notice? Notice what comes up for you and write this down in your journal. Once again rest in the felt presence of awareness in your body and the natural clarity of effortless knowing. What is it like to shift the locus of your identity by saying, "I am the presence of awareness that knows and witnesses my life." Notice what comes up for you and write this down in your reflective journal. [Dedication as above]

Nondual Awareness

Referring back to the Advaita Vedanta model of the three stages of awareness (see Table 2 above), we have now come to the most subtle and profound stage of awareness practice. This is the recognition that all experience is the expression of awareness. It is the stage of nondual awareness.

To set the context, let's recap the stages of awareness briefly. First there is the awareness that witnesses whatever arises in the mind. This stage is dualistic because we observe thoughts and emotions at a safe distance, so we do not get sucked into them. Mindfulness practice corresponds to this stage. Once our attention becomes stable, we naturally come closer to experience and open up to the full range of thoughts, emotions, sensations and perceptions. This is the practice of open awareness. At this stage awareness is the space within which experience arises just like the sky is the space within which clouds arise and pass. This is the second stage of awareness.

The practice of *on duty/off duty* makes the switch from mindfulness to open awareness by dropping the method (such as focusing on breathing as a support) and simply being present with whatever arises. The practice of *resting in the midst* builds on off duty. At this point everything in our experience becomes the meditation. Our only task is to remain present and open to whatever arises. This practice is still subtly dualistic because there is a separation between the observing awareness and what arises within it - just like there is a separation between the sky and the clouds that move through it.

When this practice becomes stable the invitation is to be curious about awareness itself. This brings us to the practice of being aware of being aware. In the practices we have done in this article we explored awareness as a quality of simply being and effortless knowing. When we touch awareness experientially, however, we see how the sense of “I” with its many guises and masks superimposes itself upon awareness, contracts around it and then projects a sense of separation from what is perceived as “other”. The practice of emptiness helps us to cut through this dualistic obscuration. We begin to see how there is no intrinsic division between awareness and what is perceived as “other”; instead what is taken to be other is simply a display of this self-same awareness.

Now, as the practice deepens we come to see for ourselves that awareness is not just the space within which experience arises; it lies at the very heart of experience, too. This is the third stage of awareness. Whatever arises in our experience is always accompanied by awareness. There is always the felt experience of something and the simultaneous knowing of it, otherwise experience cannot arise or be known. For example, if a fearful feeling arises in response to a threatening situation, we feel the fear and we know we are feeling it. This is self-evident. In the beginning it feels like we are aware of the fear as something separate from our observing awareness, then as practice deepens there is the sense that awareness is the space within which the fear arises, and now as our practice deepens further we sense that awareness lies at the very heart of the fear we are feeling. The same process applies to whatever else we are thinking, sensing, feeling or perceiving. Returning to the analogy of awareness being like water and experience being like a drink, we begin to sense for ourselves how awareness lies at the heart of all experiences just like water is the main constituent of any drink. Being and knowing lie at the heart of all experience.

Also, we explored how awareness is not affected by what we are aware of. When we are in pain, the awareness is not in pain. When we are anxious, the awareness is not anxious, and so forth. Like a mirror it reflects experience but is not tainted or stained by it. When we paid close attention to awareness, we began to sense its qualities. We sensed the expansiveness, peace, and subtle joy within awareness - how it is perfect in and of itself. The more we focus on awareness and become interested in it, the more it reveals these qualities.

We then consciously identified with awareness as being who we are. This inner shift is powerful because it brings us into alignment with that part of ourselves that is always inherently free and at peace. And now whatever emotion or mind state arises, we learn to be fully present with it and lean into it whilst recognising awareness as its very core. We stay aligned with the quality of simply being and natural clarity that is at the core of whatever thought, sensation, emotion or perception arises. It is like discovering peace

and freedom at the very core of difficult emotions—whether anger, resentment, fear, anxiety, sadness, or depression—and equally within joy and happiness. This creates a paradoxical experience: touching profound peace and fundamental okayness within anger while simultaneously experiencing the anger itself.

Going back to our favourite analogy, the practice is to stay aligned with the water and not fixate on all the different kinds of drinks. Metaphorically speaking, the water is the 99% of experience and the drink the 1%. Furthermore, we saw how things do not arise “out there” with definable characteristics; everything occurs within the mind as a vivid appearance. In this sense everything that arises is empty in that it is an appearance in the mind and does not exist outside as a tangible entity. At this point we see how everything is the expression of awareness; therefore, it is 100% awareness, not 99% awareness and 1% experience. This is the full realisation of *rigpa* or nondual awareness.

Practice: Nondual Awareness

[Preliminaries as above] Sense the presence of awareness in your body as a quality of simply being that effortlessly knows and illuminates the inner landscape of feeling. Now tune into how you are feeling emotionally and energetically right now and how this is reflected in your body. Gently incline towards what you are feeling and feel into the core of it. Can you sense how knowing what you are feeling lies at the heart of what you are feeling. These two are inextricably linked. Now align with the quality of being and knowing that lies at the heart of whatever you are experiencing. What do you notice when you do this? Can you recognise how the being and knowing element is stable while the feeling element changes moment by moment. Now just rest in the quality of simply being and effortless knowing that pervades every aspect of your present moment experience. When perceptions arise in your mind, like sights, sounds or images, recognise that this is the vivid display of your own awareness. Be less concerned with the content of your perceptions and rest in the natural clarity of these perceptions. [Dedication as above]. Once you finish this practice spend 5 minutes or so journaling what you noticed.

Empty Luminosity

What we have been describing in the section above is known in Mahamudra as the practice of empty luminosity (Mingyur Rinpoche, 2019). “Luminosity” refers to the natural clarity of awareness which illuminates experience. “Empty” refers to the fact that our experience is constantly changing, ungraspable and ephemeral. It also refers to the false duality between self and other which we explored in this article.

The invitation is to view everything in our lives through the lens of empty luminosity. It is a 24/7 practice that is not confined to the meditation seat but is practiced as we go about every aspect of our

daily activities. Whatever happens we relax into the fact that everything is changing moment by moment. Life is a sequence of moving parts that we cannot control. We see how the mind creates a big deal about things, and we relax around this too. The practice of self-kindness (from article two) can help when we feel stressed and agitated. It helps to regulate our emotions so we can stand back and get some perspective on things. This points to the emptiness side of the practice.

Also, we sense how the presence of awareness we feel within ourselves naturally extends into our life experiences and relationships. At the level of awareness there is no separation between self and other. We sense too how the categories we impose on experience, dividing things up into false polarities and putting them into boxes, are mental fabrications that obscure the intrinsic unity of life. And the more we come to recognise and rest in awareness, the more we sense its inherent perfection and peace. We touch its natural clarity and learn to trust it and take delight in it.

The important thing is to carry this practice into every aspect of daily lives, especially when things get tough. We can't always fully embody the presence of awareness in the hurly burly of life, but we can maintain some connection with it. The practice is not to forget it. This is the absolute perspective. Yet it is so important to practice compassion too and use whatever skilful means are appropriate to navigate the ups and downs of life. In this way the absolute and relative work together. The absolute keeps us in touch with the wisdom of empty luminosity and the relative keeps us in touch with compassion.

As Mingyur Rinpoche (2019) often says, the problem is we find it hard to believe that it can be so simple. There is no need to meditate in a special way. Empty luminosity is always right here. All we need to do is recognise it. This is not done in an exalted state of mind but in the midst of our ordinary, everyday mind. It does not matter if the mind is busy, messy, foggy or dull. There is always knowing awareness present – this is its intrinsic nature – and this is what we stay in touch with. We just let the mind be natural and don't lose connection with its nature. This is all there is to do. (Mingyur Rinpoche, ref)

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