



Mahamudra and Mindfulness Series, Part 1: Mindfulness

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This is the first in a series of articles exploring how the practice of mindfulness can be guided by the Mahamudra teachings of Tibetan Buddhism. Mahamudra refers to a body of teachings that represent the culmination of all the practices of the *Sarma* or New Translation schools of Tibetan Buddhism, which consider it to be the quintessential message of all their sacred texts and the ultimate goal of all meditation practice. Mahamudra, meaning “great seal”, points to how everything in existence bears two inseparable marks: first, the recognition that awareness and what it is aware of are not truly separate, and second, that nothing exists as a solid, independent thing but rather emerges within a vast web of interconnected processes. This series of articles is practice-based and intended to guide readers step-by-step through the stages of Mahamudra practice and how they can be applied in a modern context.

Mahamudra is a unique path of practice. It is highly experiential, not depending on ritual or intellectual study, but rather on directly examining the mind to uncover its essence. This is described as “recognising the nature of mind” (Namygal, 2001), which is the holy grail of Tibetan Buddhism. Mahamudra is taught to be the direct path to Enlightenment.

To recognise the nature of mind, we need to pay attention to the processes of mind as they unfold in the present moment. These tend to go unexamined, and we often find ourselves either absorbed in the content of our emotional experience

or caught up in events in everyday life. Few of us challenge the compelling reality that the mind presents to us with its ongoing stream of stories, reactions and emotions. Yet, this is not easy. It requires a lot of inner steadiness as well as being accepting and compassionate to what arises within our minds.

Mahamudra is not concerned with understanding the narratives and mind states that arise in the mind. This might be described as the content of mind, as opposed to its nature, and is more the domain of science and psychology. When undergoing psychotherapy, for example, we might examine *why* we feel the way we do. Together with a skilled therapist we might explore the roots of our anger, hurt or depression and trace their origins back to our childhood and growing up. This process can be very helpful and in the case of many Western practitioners it might be a very useful thing to do alongside the practice of Mahamudra. But it is important that these two approaches are not mixed together. In my own experience, if therapy and meditation practice run alongside each other, they can complement and enrich one another.

In the traditional Tibetan approach, however, there is very little focus on exploring the content of our experience. Mahamudra does not address the *why* of things; it is purely concerned with the *how*, *what* and *where* of things—in other words, the nature of mind rather than its content. Recognising the nature of mind is a direct and immediate process of seeing through the veils that obscure our minds and seduce us into its cycles of repetitive, habitual thinking.

Whereas much of traditional Tibetan Buddhism relies on first studying and contemplating the treatises of the Buddha and other great teachers and then gradually applying these in practice, Mahamudra takes a distinct approach by regarding the mind itself as our primary source of study. While studying literature has its place, Mahamudra emphasises looking directly at the mind itself. The former approach relies on logic and reasoning to establish the truth of things whereas the latter approach relies on observing the mind directly to establish the true nature of reality. Although Mahamudra takes the latter approach, it also relies on the path of logic and reasoning to prepare the foundation for its distinctive method that comes later.

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Looking directly at the mind is by no means easy. It requires a lot of preparation, for which the starting point is mindfulness practice—learning to observe the arising and passing of our thoughts and emotions in a nonjudgmental way. The more stable our mindfulness practice is, the better prepared we are for Mahamudra, which invites us to see how all our thoughts, emotions and perceptions are not solid and real as they may seem but are in fact illusory—like bubbles appearing and disappearing again in a fast-flowing stream.

This is the entry point into emptiness, which is a cornerstone of the Mahamudra path. Emptiness is a misleading translation of the Sanskrit term “*sunyata*”. In essence, *sunyata* means that none of our ideas about things accurately describes them because everything is changing all the time, and nothing has independent existence—everything is interconnected. What follows from this is that not only are things empty of the concepts we ascribe to them, but they are “full” of the whole universe. Just take a tree for example. We might call it an “oak tree” but this label comes nowhere close to describing the uniqueness of the tree you are looking, how it depends on the soil and rain and sunshine to grow, and how each of these natural forces depend on many other processes too, expanding out in all directions. The same applies to our minds. We might label a feeling “anxiety” but this comes nowhere close to describing its unique, changing manifestation in our minds in any moment, how it relates to other thoughts, feelings and sensations, and how our experience of anxiety is shaped by the way we grew up, and the genes that built us stretching far back into the past to the evolutionary forces that forged our bodies and brains as human beings.

The key point about Mahamudra is not to form an intellectual idea about emptiness. We do not just say, “Okay, I get what you mean, everything is empty and interdependent”, and just leave it at that. What we do is look at our changing experience through the lens of *sunyata* in real time, moment by moment, as life unfolds, all the while looking behind the labels and concepts to the ephemeral, ungraspable flow of experience. The more we do this, the more we come to see that our habitual way of perceiving things has trapped us in a conceptual prison, but now the practice of emptiness frees us from this prison so that we can relax into the flow of our lives that is an ongoing mystery. This is both scary and liberating. This lies at the heart of the Mahamudra way of looking directly at the mind. We explain how to do this in Part 4 of this series.

The more we recognise and abide in the empty nature of experience, the more we come to sense and taste the all-pervading awareness that permeates every aspect of ourselves. In Tibetan, this is called *rigpa*. Another term for this is “nondual awareness” in contrast to “mindful awareness” as commonly used in the secular mindfulness tradition. Mindful awareness is concerned with training our attention to remain in the present moment rather than

getting lost in thought. Through regular practice we can gain some mastery over our attention and choose what thoughts and emotions to cultivate and what to leave alone. For example, we can choose to feed feelings of joy and love and let go of feelings of worry and rumination. Moreover, training our attention to remain in the present moment gives us the opportunity to sense and abide in the space of awareness that holds our lives. Perhaps “awareness” is not the best word here because it implies dualistic perception such as “me aware of this or that”. The term *rigpa* refers more to an underlying field of clarity and knowing that encompasses all that we think, feel and perceive. This kind of awareness is not dualistic because it includes all of our experience equally just like the sky includes all the clouds that arise within it. This is the entry point to “nondual awareness”, and this is where mindfulness practice leads us to at a deeper level. The problem is that it is often not recognised for what it is. It is like the story of two fish swimming in a pond. The one fish says to the other one, “how do you find the water today?” to which the other fish replies, “what is water?” The second fish spends all its life in water but does not recognise it for what it is. Similarly *rigpa* is present in the background all the time, though its presence often goes unnoticed. Mahamudra practice guides us towards the recognition of *rigpa* so that we learn to relax into it. When we do this, its qualities naturally emerge and enrich our lives. This is something we explore more fully later in this series.

When we combine the insight into emptiness with the ongoing recognition of *rigpa* then we have a powerful path to recognising nature of mind that opens the door to a life of wonder and mystery rather than one of being enslaved to fixed ideas and limiting habits. In essence, the realisation of emptiness and nondual awareness are central to the practice of Mahamudra. They might be seen as the two sides of the same coin.

Traditionally, in Tibetan Buddhism, there would be a lot of preparation done before we began the actual practice of Mahamudra. This would involve doing preliminary practices called *Ngöndro* that are steeped in a Tibetan view of reality, and which require a lot of faith and staying power to complete. Each of the main *Ngöndro* practices requires 100,000 repetitions of various mantras, including 100,000 physical prostrations, that might take some people years to complete. This might not work for everyone, especially for those leading busy, fast-paced lives. In my case, I spent many years practising the *Ngöndro* and underwent a traditional 3-year, 3-month retreat. The problem is that many people might lose heart or not manage to complete these preliminaries. Some people might find it hard to connect with such practices because they are deeply steeped in a worldview or approach to mind that might feel alien to many Westerners. This would be a great pity because they

might never come to the actual practice of Mahamudra, which is highly experiential and not “religious” in and of itself because the way it is practiced depends on how one relates to one’s own mind rather than how one puts into practice a particular religious system or worldview.

Overview of Series

The secular mindfulness tradition in the modern West is a useful bridge to Mahamudra practice. Like Mahamudra, mindfulness approaches are strongly experiential and focus on working directly with one’s own mind rather than adhering to a belief system or engaging in extensive study. This is controversial in many Buddhist circles as many Buddhists see secular mindfulness as a skill that has been extracted from the Buddhist teachings leaving the important ethical and philosophical context behind. But one could also argue that mindfulness is a uniquely modern phenomenon that has emerged in response to the struggles we face both psychologically and socially and integrates insights and practices from Buddhism, psychology and neuroscience. In my opinion, it is fit for purpose for the times we find ourselves in, just as Buddhism itself has always responded and adapted to the culture it found itself in.

It might be useful, however, briefly to clarify the differences between secular mindfulness and Buddhist mindfulness. The secular approach helps people better regulate their emotions and live in a way that is present-centred, accepting and kind. One might say that it is about living life in a conscious and full way. In Buddhism mindfulness is part of an integrated approach (such as the Noble Eightfold Path) for attaining liberation from *samsara*, or cyclic existence. In brief, what we are liberating ourselves from are cycles of dissatisfaction and struggle (*samsara*) so that we can awaken to lasting peace and freedom (*nirvana*). So, on the one hand, secular mindfulness is more concerned with wellbeing in this life, while Buddhism focuses on liberation from recurring patterns of suffering—whether understood through the lens of reincarnation across many lives, or through modern insights about how psychological and behavioral patterns can perpetuate themselves across generations through both genetic and cultural inheritance.

Traditionally, Mahamudra sits in the latter camp and it has been understood and practiced in the context of reincarnation. So how then, one might ask, can secular mindfulness be a bridge to Mahamudra because they sit in different camps? In my view, both as a practising Buddhist and mindfulness teacher, it comes down to one’s personal motivation and what is meant by “liberation”. For me, the key question is whether liberation needs to be linked to the idea of reincarnation in the sense of becoming free

from the cycles of suffering over countless lifetimes, or whether it is about freeing oneself from habits of limited thinking, reactivity and attachment *right now*. It strikes me that Mahamudra is about learning to relate our minds in a fresh and immediate way that frees us from fixed ideas and limiting habits. It opens the door to liberation in this very moment. Therefore, in my experience, there is not a black and white difference between secular mindfulness and Buddhism—it all depends on the depth to which you want to go.

For some people, mindfulness practice is a way to regulate their emotions, while others might be drawn to the deeper path of freedom, and for these, Mahamudra would be the natural direction of their mindfulness practice. The stages of practice that we outline in this series are an experiential approach to mind training that has emerged from Tibetan Buddhism but is not reliant on becoming a Buddhist or adhering to Buddhist philosophy or belief systems. Yet, it is rooted in Mahamudra, and it goes in the direction of recognising the nature of mind. This experiential approach has been developed by the Mindfulness Association (n.d.), an organisation based in Scotland that has been developing mindfulness training for many years drawing on the wisdom of Tibetan Buddhism, as well as contemporary sources such as neuroscience and psychology.

Traditionally, Buddhism meditation practice proceeds in two stages: first *shamatha* and then *vipassana*. Mahamudra follows this approach too. *Shamatha*, or calm abiding meditation, is a way of settling the mind and stabilising our attention so that it is not pulled in all directions by distracting thoughts. It becomes stable and workable. On the basis of this stability, we can look at the mind with intelligence and clarity. This is called *vipassana* or clear seeing. In Buddhism, it is *vipassana* that transforms the mind and brings about liberation.

The Mindfulness Association’s (n.d.) stages of practice involve four consecutive stages of training: mindfulness, compassion, insight and wisdom. The mindfulness stage corresponds to *shamatta*. Building on mindfulness there is a strong focus on compassion. This deepens the experience of *shamatta* because compassion practices provide a strong holding container for our experience, especially the practice of self-compassion. What we call the insight and wisdom stages correspond to *vipassana*.

The Mindfulness Association approach to mindfulness is based on the principle that nothing is inherently wrong with us. Often, when people practice meditation, they encounter all manner of disturbing emotions and thought patterns. Very quickly they might conclude that their minds are a complete mess, and bringing awareness to this mess makes it seem far worse. For this reason, the view of “nothing wrong” orients people to a deeper level of their being where fundamentally all is well. This level transcends the surface turbulence of

thoughts and emotions, allowing practitioners to find a sense of underlying peace and acceptance.

This corresponds to the principle of ground, path and fruition that underpins Mahamudra and is a cornerstone of Tibetan Buddhism (Tulku Thondup, 1997). The ground refers to our Buddha Nature, which is our innate wellness and sanity as human beings (Grosnick, 1995). This is a core principle in Mahayana Buddhism that recognises our fundamental nature as already whole, free and at peace—though we may habitually perceive ourselves through a lens of limitation and inadequacy. This inner purity is often obscured by all our issues and “emotional baggage” in this life. A classic Buddhist example is that of a beggar living in a shack on a heap of manure. Unbeknown to the beggar there is a lump of gold buried beneath the manure. Tragically, he never discovers the gold and goes to his grave thinking that he is poor when in fact he was richer than in his wildest dreams. The gold is the metaphor for Buddha Nature, and the manure represents our issues and afflictions. The path is one of patiently working through the manure until we discover the gold until finally there is fruition in the sense that we rediscover the ground which has been there all along. It is like coming home to our innate wholeness that was never undermined or damaged by the ups and downs of our lives. This principle of Buddha Nature is implicitly present throughout our training.

The compassion stage is a way of working skillfully with our challenges, emotional issues and obstacles and seeing them as the manure for the emergence of our true nature that might be likened to a lotus flower growing out of the mud. This corresponds to the principle in Tibetan Buddhism of the obstacles being the path. We need the obstacles to grow and mature. The compassion process also entails aligning with our inner centre or core and providing a holding space for all the different parts of ourselves that might struggle in different ways. This draws on the Tibetan principle of deity and mandala. The deity is a way of accessing our Buddha Nature and its manifold qualities, and the mandala is the energetic field of the deity through which we hold and relate to the different parts of ourselves. On the basis of this inner work, we then gradually open out to other living beings drawing on the so-called Four Immeasurable qualities of loving kindness, compassion, joy and equanimity.

The insight stage works with our unseen habitual patterns. What blocks so many of us in our practice and in our lives are hidden mechanisms of habit that influence our behaviour without us realising this. Many of these operate at the subliminal level of mind just below the surface of our normal conscious awareness. In the third article in this series on insight, we offer some methods for gaining access to these mechanisms of habit. The underlying premise here is that, when we see these clearly, they lose their power. An example is a magician’s trick. Initially, we are taken in by it until we see how their sleight of hand fools us. When we

see this clearly, we smile at their trick but we are no longer beguiled by it. The same principle applies to our unseen habits of mind.

At this level, insight refers to understanding our habitual patterns. We need this level of insight before we can progress to the next level, which is insight into the nature of the mind. A metaphor for this process is the sky and the clouds. The clouds are like our obscuring habitual patterns, and the sky is the true nature of the mind. We first need insight into the clouds, which has the effect of gradually loosening their hold over us so that we begin to see the sky through the gaps in the clouds.

The second form of insight is to see the skylike nature of our minds. This metaphor suggests that our mind, at its essence, is like the vast, clear sky. Just as the sky remains unaffected by the clouds passing through it, our innate awareness is unchanging and unaffected by the thoughts and emotions that arise within it. This does not mean our minds are blank or that thoughts are unreal, but rather it points to a spacious, aware quality that underlies all our experiences. This metaphor invites us to recognise a more expansive sense of mind beyond our usual limited perspective. As we progress in our practice, we explore this idea more deeply, learning to experience this open, clear awareness directly. This is the focus of the wisdom stage—the fourth article in the series—which then approaches Mahamudra practice directly. Therefore, in this way the mindfulness, compassion and insight stages lay the ground for the final stage, wisdom, which opens the door to insight into the nature of the mind.

This pathway of practice offers a unique opportunity to explore the nature of mind beyond conceptual boundaries. It opens doors to profound insights and experiences that can fundamentally transform our understanding of ourselves and the world around us. Many who have walked this path have found it deeply rewarding and life changing. However, it is important to note that we cannot guarantee that this pathway will lead to full realisation of the nature of mind. Even traditional Buddhist practices acknowledge this uncertainty.

Mindfulness—Stage 1

Having set out the context or direction of travel above, this first stage focuses on mindfulness practice. The etymology of the term “mindfulness” in Buddhism can be traced back to the Pali term *Sati* which means to remember the teachings of the Buddha and to apply them in the present moment. So, mindfulness has a sense of recollection or remembering. One of the leading figures of the secular mindfulness approach, Jon Kabat Zinn, defined mindfulness as “the awareness that emerges through paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment.” (Kabat-Zinn,

2003, p. 145). The key elements here are present-moment awareness and non-judgmental acceptance of what arises in the mind. Rob Nairn, the founder of the Mindfulness Association, defined mindfulness as “knowing what is happening while it is happening without preference” (Choden & Regan-Addis, 2018, p 9). Again, there is an emphasis on present-moment awareness that is non-judgmental, but the term “knowing” is used. This term is used frequently in the Mahamudra teachings. Initially, the focus is on knowing the thoughts, emotions and perceptions that arise in the mind. This is a form of dualistic knowing because we are attending to something other, namely thoughts and emotions. Once we have gained some mastery over our attention and it is not continually pulled away by distraction, the focus then shifts to coming to know the quality of knowing itself. Or to put it differently, being aware of being aware. This is the shift from mindful awareness to nondual awareness. So, it is not present-moment awareness of what arises within the mind, but present-moment awareness of awareness itself. The main point here is that mindfulness is not limited to stress reduction, or emotional regulation, but it is a gateway into profound insights into the nature of mind itself.

We will now describe an approach to sitting meditation that is rooted in Mahamudra and then offer a practice in this respect. As mentioned before, the key principle is nothing wrong—we are already Buddhas or, in simpler terms, we are all fundamentally okay; we just need to find a way to wake up to this fact. What helps to orient us to this deeper truth of who we are is to set an initial intention and motivation before we start practising. Most mindfulness approaches do not follow this step. This corresponds to the Buddhist practices of Taking Refuge and engendering *Bodhicitta*. Essentially, taking refuge is choosing to align ourselves with the fact that the ground of our being is inherently pure and complete. Buddhists do this by drawing on the inspiration of the historical Buddha, Shakyamuni. But the key point is to align oneself with the state of freedom and peace that lies beyond our everyday experience of distress and suffering however one chooses to do this. *Bodhicitta* is generally described as forming the intention to become enlightened for the benefit of all living beings; in this way, our practice is not a selfish endeavour but is dedicated to the welfare of all. This is very important for Mahamudra because it invites us into a vast space of heart connection with all living beings that allows the nondual awareness (*rigpa*) of Mahamudra to flourish.

The important approach to intention and motivation is to reflect at the start of a practice *what* we are about to do and *why*. In practice, we find that people might start with a superficial motivation for their practice, but this gradually deepens over time. For example, an initial motivation might be to feel less reactive and stressed in daily life, but over time this might change to becoming aware of the habits that amplify their reactivity and stress so that they might help

others do the same, too. The important thing is to allow people to tap into their own wisdom and formulate things in their own way that is not prescriptive.

After setting intention and motivation, we then do a short settling practice. This is an important starting point for any meditation practice because it helps us make the shift from everyday mind to meditation mind. In daily life, we are usually focused on thinking and doing many things which engage the sympathetic nervous system; this is part of the autonomic nervous system that prepares the body to respond to stress or danger by triggering physiological changes like increased heart rate, dilated pupils and energy release. This is comparable to driving a car in high gear with the attendant risk of stress and burnout. To change down into the lower gear of simply being present, which characterises *Shamatta* meditation, it can be helpful to actively engage the parasympathetic nervous system. This part of the nervous system automatically helps your body relax and restore resources after stress by triggering physical changes like slowing the heartbeat, promoting digestion and conserving energy. It involves consciously slowing and deepening the breathing. There is a lot of evidence that regulating the breathing in this way—ideally by taking 5 breaths per minute—calms the nervous system. For so many of us caught up in the hurly burly of modern life, dysregulation of the nervous system is both a source of suffering and an obstacle to meditation, and for this reason a settling stage is important.

The next stage in the process is grounding. The settling breathing brings us more fully into the body. This allows for a deeper embodiment, which is so important for meditation practice. It is particularly the case for modern practitioners who are often cut off from their bodies and live in their heads. This was not the case with the Tibetan practitioners of old who were deeply embodied people. The reasons why we do not fully inhabit our bodies are complex and often related to trauma that we hold in the body. But even just feeling the sensations in our body and noticing how the ground unconditionally supports the body moves us in the direction of deeper embodiment. The Mahamudra practice instructions do not mention embodiment because it was assumed that people were firmly rooted in their bodies, but this is nonetheless a crucial stage in the process of coming to rest in open awareness which comes next. A possible pitfall of open awareness is spacing out and getting lost in daydreams. For this reason, being rooted in the body grounds one in the present moment because the body is always in the present whereas the mind is so often in the past or the future. The term “resting” (Thrangu Rinpoche, 2003) is found a lot in Mahamudra literature. It can be a slightly misleading term because it does not necessarily mean that we are resting in the sense of reclining at peace in a comfortable armchair! What it means is to rest in a state of open awareness while accepting all the ups and downs of our thought activity and

feeling world. We might not be feeling that peaceful, but it is a way of approaching and touching the nature of mind even if we cannot stay in this space for very long.

What makes resting possible is acceptance. This is a central thread running through this approach to mindfulness. Acceptance is another potentially misleading term. It does not mean that we should condone or resign ourselves to negative states of mind. It means that we come into a clear and non-reactive relationship to whatever arises in the mind. In other words, we make space for whatever stuff comes up in us. When we do this—when we say *Yes* to our experience in the moment and not *No*—space naturally opens up because we are not resisting what we are feeling. For example, if feelings of anxiety arise as we go about our day, we might intentionally allow these feelings to be there and let ourselves just feel them, perhaps deepening our breathing as we do so. What this does is to remove the resistance to the anxiety which so often compounds it. We might then sense some space between ourselves and the anxious feelings and feel less identified with them. Next, we might try to relax into the space in and around what we are feeling. Not only does this help the anxiety calm down but it also initiates us into the felt sense of *rigpa* awareness that dwells in this space. Coming to know and experience awareness directly lies at the heart of Mahamudra—and crucially coming to know this for ourselves in our own way because direct felt experience is the way we wake up to nature of mind, not through reading books and texts. This is something we explore in more detail later in the series.

Acceptance equates to a key instruction in Mahamudra which is not to block or interfere with our ordinary mind but just let it be as it is. “Ordinary mind” is an interesting description in Mahamudra. What it means is that the deeper realisation of the truth of who we are—our Buddha Nature—does not occur when we are in an exalted state that is far removed from everyday life. Enlightenment is not to be found in mystical states of bliss and flow. Instead, realisation of the nature of mind happens gradually in the midst of our ordinary everyday mind as we experience it. For this reason, the Mahamudra teachings encourage us to be curious and make friends with our everyday ups and downs of thought and emotion. We are encouraged to allow our ordinary mind to be as it is—there is no need to suppress or block it.

There is an important caveat here—allowing ordinary mind to be as it is does not mean that we indulge in all manner of angry reactions, wanton desires and random flights of fantasy. In Buddhism, it is seen to be very important not to feed afflictive states of mind. What it means is that we allow our everyday movement of thoughts, emotions and mind states to arise by themselves, display themselves and liberate themselves. This is a key instruction in Mahamudra. It rests on the distinction between thoughts and thinking. We allow our thoughts to come and go freely without blocking them,

but we are very discerning about what thoughts we feed, which is the meaning of “thinking”. An example might be a worry that pops up in the mind. This might be a feeling of anxiety that is tied up with a concern that we might receive some bad news about our health after having undergone a scan. In meditation, we allow this feeling state and concern to fully arise and be experienced—this is the thought—but we are careful not to jump on board and feed the feelings of anxiety by dwelling on the worry—that is what is meant by thinking.

Allowing experience to self-arise, self-display and self-liberate is the basis for recognising emptiness—the ephemeral, transient nature of experience—and it is also the basis for touching the nondual awareness that exists in and around our experience. We recognise *rigpa* in this way in the midst of ordinary mind. All of this is made possible by the practice of resting in open awareness. This is similar to the practice of open monitoring in mindfulness-based stress reduction. Both practices take the flow of thoughts, sensations and emotions to be the primary focus of meditation but, whereas open monitoring is concerned with gaining insight into the nature of emotional and cognitive patterns, resting in open awareness is primarily concerned with coming to know awareness itself and resting in it. Most beginners can only stay there for a little while before distracting thoughts carry them away. Yet even touching this deeper truth momentarily is helpful. It is like seeing the clouds break and the blue sky appear and feeling the sunshine on our faces before the clouds close in again and thought takes us away.

Distraction is an ever-present reality in most people’s lives. To work skillfully with it, we need a focal support, something that tethers our attention to what is occurring naturally in the present moment. Most secular mindfulness approaches focus a lot on how to use a support when describing sitting meditation but few of them identify the stages of grounding and resting that precede and accompany it. This is the unique contribution of Mahamudra.

There are various supports that can be used. Sound is a useful focal support because it can give a feeling of expansiveness. Some people can tighten around their breathing or try to control it and for other people an internal focus like breathing can trigger traumatic symptoms. In the Mahamudra tradition, a wide variety of focal supports are used in *shamatta* practice, some external and others internal. In the practice described below, we are using breathing as a focal support, but in the audio practice found on the Mindfulness Association website (www.mindfulnessassociation.net), we offer both sound and breathing as focal supports. Whatever focal support we use, the key point is that it is something for our attention to return to when our mind gets lost in thought. It is like an anchor in the present moment. When our mind wanders, we do not need to judge ourselves, and we certainly should not block thoughts. All we need to do is recognise

that we have become distracted and return our attention to a focal support like breathing.

What is distinctive about the Mahamudra approach to mindfulness is that, when we regain mindfulness and return our attention to a focal support, we also regain the space of open awareness. So, it is not just mindfulness of breathing. When we return our attention to the breathing, this brings us back into the body, which is grounding, and this experience of being anchored and rooted in the body makes it possible for our awareness naturally to open and for us then to rest in open awareness. This is important because this approach to mindfulness training is all about moving towards recognising the nature of mind—and resting in open awareness makes this possible. It is not just about mindfulness of breathing in and of itself.

At the end of the practice session, we do a simple form of sharing. This equates to what is called “dedication of merit” in Buddhist practice. The idea is that we always finish a session of sitting practice by reaffirming our basic motivation, which is *Bodhicitta*. We are not just doing the practice for ourselves but for all living beings everywhere. This reaffirms the sense of big heart and vast space that Mahamudra practice thrives on. In our experiential trainings, we encourage people to come up with their own unique sharing rather than specific Buddhist prayers because sometimes these can be recited in ways that are rote and lack feeling. We will now offer the core sitting meditation practice from the Mindfulness Association’s practice approach based on the discussion above.

Mindfulness Practice

Settling, Grounding, Resting and Mindfulness Support of Breathing (SGRS)

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 kindly way that brings you home to your essential nature that is at peace and free. Then reflect on your motivation for practising mindfulness, for example, how you might hope to benefit yourself and others through doing your practice.

As a way of settling the mind, focus in a relaxed way on your breathing. Breathing in a little more deeply than normal, without strain, and then gently releasing the breath. Keeping the in- and out-breaths equal in length, you may find it useful to count to three or four on the in-breath and a similar count on the out-breath. Thoughts will continue to pop into your mind, and this is totally normal. Let them go free, without attempting to suppress or get involved with them. After a few minutes, focus a bit more on the out-breath and then let the breath return to its natural rhythm and let go of the counting.

You may notice that by focusing on the out-breath your centre of gravity drops more fully into your body. This brings you into the phase of grounding. Now become aware of weight of your body on the ground and notice the points of touch and pressure as you sit on the chair or cushion: mind resting in the body like the body rests on the ground. Gradually broaden your focus to include sensations within the body, noticing how you feel in your body. You can do this by scanning through the body systematically, or just opening to whatever sensations draw your attention. Then become aware of the space around your body, noticing that the body is resting on the ground with space all around.

This brings you into the phase of resting in open awareness—being with your experience as it arises and passes without any sense of doing or striving. Simply be aware of whatever arises through your senses without the need to think or react in any way—feeling sensations on the body, noticing thoughts, being in touch with emotions, and aware of sounds occurring in the space around you. If you find yourself reacting, then just be with the reactions; in this way allowing the mind to be open, alert and at rest.

When you notice that you have become engaged in thinking, this is the point where you work with the focal support of breathing. Gently refocus your attention on your breathing and how the breath moves in your body—how you inhabit a breathing body. As you focus on the breathing simultaneously remain open to all that is happening in your moment-by-moment experience. The focus on breathing is not blocking out the rest of your experience but is an anchor that supports you to remain present in open awareness.

Be aware of any tendency to control or change the breath, simply allowing the breathing to happen in its own way. You can let yourself simply surrender to the breath, as if you are letting yourself “be breathed”. Each time the mind wanders, and you recognise this fact, gently and kindly bring your attention back to the breathing. This in turn brings you back to your body, which is grounding, and to the space of resting: mind resting in the body, body resting on the ground and attention lightly focused on breathing.

Again and again, you might notice yourself getting lost in thought. Patiently notice this without judgment and return your attention to the breathing—losing awareness and finding it again. When you regain awareness keep a light touch on the breathing whilst resting too in the space of open awareness.

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”.

Link to the audio recording, which can be found on the Mindfulness Association website: <https://www.mindfulnessassociation.net/mindfulness-practice/>.

Benefits and Challenges

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 people’s life circumstances. Even one session a day is very helpful because the regularity of practice allows the practice to deepen over time. In the short term, this helps to settle the mind so that there are fewer distracting thoughts, and we are less carried away by them. This fulfils the *shamatta* aspect of Mahamudra practice which is to engender a quality of calm abiding in the mind. In the *Aspiration of Mahamudra* by the 3rd Karmapa, Rangjung Dorje (Nalanda Translation Committee, n.d.), it says: “May the waves of coarse and subtle thoughts be pacified in their own place; may the ocean of the mind abide naturally undisturbed by the wind of distraction, free of the sediment of torpor and dullness; may the water of mind rest in flawless tranquility”. Just like still water can reflect many things, so too the calm mind can reflect our thoughts, emotions and perceptions with clarity. And just like wind can stir up the sediment in the water and make it hard to see into its depths, so too the over-activation of thoughts can unsettle the mind, and the sediment of dullness and foginess can block its natural clarity. The calm abiding aspect of SGRS calms the mind so that it becomes clear, and this allows for the sediment of mental afflictions to be pacified. This is the short-term function of the practice.

The quality of acceptance that is an intrinsic part of SGRS creates the conditions for compassion, which we come to in the next article. This allows for the resting in open awareness that gradually begins to lay the foundation for insight—the clear seeing of *vipassana*. In the early stages, this part of the practice is in the background, but the more the mind settles and the stronger the acceptance and self-compassion becomes, the more there is a natural opening of our awareness that allows for a deeper level of seeing. We will come to this in the subsequent articles.

It is also helpful to integrate mindfulness practice into daily life by using everyday tasks as a focus for the practice—activities like washing the dishes, waiting in a shopping queue and taking a shower. We train ourselves to be present with what we are doing while we are doing it. This fulfils the focused attention aspect of mindfulness

practice (like using a focal support in sitting practice). At the same time, we maintain a sense of perspective and headspace—we sense the space within which are lives are unfolding rather than being over-focused on a task at hand. This fulfils the open awareness aspect of mindfulness practice. We need to attend to both aspects for the practice of Mahamudra to flourish and take root. The great meditation masters of the past always stressed how important it is to maintain mindful awareness in everything we do, even so far as maintaining lucidity in our dreams at nighttime.

Many obstacles and challenges can arise such as repeatedly getting lost in thought. What can help here is to remember that mindfulness is not about holding one’s attention rigidly in the present moment. It is about losing awareness and finding it again. For example, when we drift off into distraction, we notice this without judgment and then patiently bring our attention back to the breathing. This is how the process works, and this is how awareness grows. The deeper obstacles are related to holding unrealistic assumptions and expectations about our practice. Often we do not see these, but they can affect our practice significantly. These might include thoughts like: “I have too many thoughts, how can I get rid of them?” or “I should be feeling peaceful and calm by now, why am I still so agitated?” All these assumptions are based on changing the content of our experience with the assumption that we should feel better by meditating. Going back to the principle of ordinary mind in Mahamudra, the key point is not to alter the mind at all but to leave it alone and look clearly at it with curiosity and kindness. This is what brings about real change. The key antidote to these obstacles is always to accept how we are right now.

Conclusion

This paper presents a novel approach to mindfulness teaching that integrates the profound wisdom of Mahamudra with contemporary mindfulness practice. Unlike traditional presentations of either system alone, our approach offers several unique contributions to the field:

First, it provides a practical framework (SGRS—Settling, Grounding, Resting and Support) that makes advanced contemplative practices more accessible to modern practitioners without requiring extensive philosophical study or religious commitment. This framework addresses a crucial gap between basic mindfulness techniques and deeper meditative traditions.

Second, our approach maintains the experiential emphasis of Mahamudra while adapting it for contemporary needs. Rather than simply extracting techniques from their traditional context, we have carefully preserved the essential aspects of direct looking at mind while making them accessible through modern mindfulness methodology. This

bridges the often-perceived divide between secular mindfulness and traditional contemplative practices.

Third, by emphasising the principle of “nothing wrong” and working with ordinary mind, this approach offers a fresh perspective on common challenges in mindfulness practice. Instead of seeing thoughts or emotional turbulence as obstacles to overcome, practitioners learn to use these experiences as gateways to deeper insight.

The stages we have outlined—mindfulness, compassion, insight and wisdom—provide a clear developmental pathway that practitioners can follow according to their own pace and inclination. This systematic progression allows for both immediate practical benefits and the potential for profound transformation, addressing both therapeutic and contemplative aims.

Looking ahead, several important areas warrant further investigation. Future research should examine the application of this approach in clinical settings, particularly its therapeutic potential and adaptability to different treatment contexts. Work is also needed to develop specific protocols for different populations, considering varying levels of experience, cultural backgrounds and practical needs. Additionally, systematic research into the effects of integrating traditional Mahamudra instructions with contemporary mindfulness could yield valuable insights into the mechanisms of transformation and the progression of practice. Furthermore, exploring how this approach might contribute to the ongoing dialogue between contemplative traditions and modern psychology could enrich both fields, potentially leading to new understandings of mind and consciousness while informing more effective approaches to mental health and wellbeing.

While our approach emerges from traditional Mahamudra teachings, it responds to contemporary needs without diluting the essential wisdom of the tradition. It offers a middle way between purely secular mindfulness and traditional Buddhist practice, providing practitioners with tools for both immediate wellbeing and deeper transformation.

The journey from basic mindfulness through the recognition of mind’s nature is both profound and practical. As we have shown through the SGRS framework, this journey can be approached systematically while honoring both modern and traditional wisdom. We hope this contribution will help practitioners and teachers bridge the gap between contemporary mindfulness approaches and the deeper insights available through traditional contemplative practices.

Declarations

Conflict of Interest The author declares no competing interests.

Use of Artificial Intelligence AI was not used.

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