**Ocean of True Meaning**

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**01 Introduction to Mahamudra**

The word Mahamudra can be thought of in four ways (at least):

1. **A lineage** –coming down through the Indo-Tibetan tradition is this stream of teaching, which ultimately derives from the Buddha (at least, that’s what’s said), down to some of the great Indian mahasiddhas like Saraha and then into the Tibetan tradition. The stream of teaching we’re looking at comes through the Indian teachers Tilopa and Naropa, to Marpa, then to Milarepa who then taught Gampopa. Those great teachers had very different lifestyles – Marpa was a kind of gentleman farmer and householder, Milarepa spent many years meditating in caves and Gampopa was a monk. It then carried on down into the Kagyu school of Tibetan Buddhism and the text we’re looking at comes from the Karma Kagyu school. This lineage comes down through present-day teachers, to us, so there is a lineage, through these great figures.
2. **A view** – Two great aspects of Mahayana Buddhism are combined in Mahamudra. It’s a combination of a Yogacara strand about the nature of mind and Madhyamaka – Nagarjuna’s teachings about emptiness – that everything is ungraspable with no inherent existence and you can’t capture experience in words and concepts; what the Heart Sutra is getting at. We have our experience, which words describe to some extent, but they cannot fully capture how things really are. That view takes us into our direct experience, so we know directly how things really are.
3. **A state** **of realisation** – the mahamudra state – mahamudra as realisation of the empty ungraspable nature of things and that there is no subject-object duality, so if you arrive at where mahamudra is aiming to take you, your mind is completely flowing and you’re completely in and at one with life – there is no sense of a ‘me’ having an experience or separate from existence, even as a silent observer of how things are. We are fully integrated back into life so there is no separation. The sense of existential aloneness, which is the deepest dukkha of all, completely disappears.
4. **Practice** – all kinds of methods are used but there is a lot of formless practice/ just sitting with a very relaxed, simple approach. Mahamudra practice aims to be as natural and simple as possible. Therefore, one of our main tasks is to be as relaxed and easy as possible. Keep letting yourself relax – and relax – and relax…

Some of Mahamudra has come into Triratna through Bhante’s seminars, particularly those on the songs of Milarepa, including *The Shepherd’s Search for Mind*.

As mahamudra practice goes deeper, there are said to be two strands:

1. The Path of Method – with lots of complex practices
2. The Path of Freedom – shamatha and vipashyana – looking at the nature of mind.

The Indo-Tibetan tradition says there are two approaches:

1. Approach meditation from the View – get Right View through study and apply to meditation
2. Approach the View within meditation – really looking at what you find in your experience and out of that comes Right View

Mahamudra emphasises the second – meditation and looking at the nature of experience.

The retreat includes a lot of meditation and use of extracts from *The Ocean of True Meaning* by the 9th Karmapa. He was recognised early as a tulku and spent most of his life travelling in a tent city all over Tibet and into Bhutan - a travelling, teaching and practice encampment with 100s travelling and 1,000s gathering when he was teaching. He wrote about 10 volumes but is especially known for the 3 Mahamudra volumes, of which this is the biggest.

There is relative truth and absolute truth. This is an ocean of teachings about how things really are, taking you into the realm of direct experience to really see and know how things are. It aims to cover the whole path. The early sections of *The Ocean of True Meaning* cover the four reminders, as motivation for practice, and the mula yogas as there’s a big emphasis on receiving the adhisthana of the teachers. Then sections on shamatha and vipashyana and then more advanced teachings on how to enhance the practices and how the path unfolds as you go deeper. This retreat focuses on extracts from the chapters on shamatha and vipashyana.

Starting the first meditation with the Shakyamuni mantra is because we’re aiming to open to the adhisthana of the Buddha as handed down through this tradition, to us, and to practice together and to see through that sense of separate self ‘in here’ and everyone else ‘out there’. Feeling part of one practice will help that, and mean we look after each other, so all will go well. We’re not just practising for ourselves but within the Bodhisattva Ideal for the whole world, so the whole practice is based on open-heartedness to life; where we’re headed is more and more into the flow of life and fully alive. All the practices help bring us to life, fully. Over time the practice can become more simple, relaxed and easy. This meditation focuses on us settling and bringing ourselves into the body as a basis for looking at how we use our minds in shamatha and vipashyana. In Just Sitting practice, opening to and focusing on one sense at a time takes you more into shamatha. Opening to all six senses, bringing in one sense after the other, and building up to be open to them all at the same time, takes you more into insight territory.

**03 Relaxing and Barlung breathing**

We’re looking to relax without making a big deal out of it. It’s easy to feel into the body, find some tension, then go into horrified anxiety and produce a desperate flapping effort to relax it, which somehow doesn’t work very well! But if you just think of a good friend, someone who is really on your side with whom you can be yourself, even if you’re a bit twitchy they don’t *berate* you to relax, they just relate to you with care, and that helps you relax. We’ll find all kinds of tensions – deeper as we go on – but that’s alright. It’s just part of the human condition. We notice and bring as much care and loving kindness as we can and that’s enough; maybe they release and maybe they stay tight, but that’s okay, we trust that all will be well over time.

One method that is used quite a lot is Barlung (meaning intermediate – breath). It’s very simple – all you do is bring awareness down into the area below the navel and feel the movements of that area as it is affected by the breath. It’s just like in the Mindfulness of Breathing, when the mind is restless, and we bring awareness down in the body. But we’re also doing it in a context of calling to mind times when we’ve been breathing really easily, or images that help us breathe easily, such as sitting by a warm log fire on a cold winter day, really relaxing and breathing from the lower belly. Like a baby that’s just been fed and feels completely satiated and all is right with the world. Or images of bears with big tummies – Baloo in the Jungle Book or Pooh Bear. Breathing easily and warm. Whatever works for you.

It can be a full-on practice or a mindfulness anchor: with part of your attention on your breathing through the day, or when doing Just Sitting, when your mind is all over the place, to anchor you in the practice and keep your mind at home. It is said to have many benefits:

* An antidote to anxiety
* A way of generating energy, as energy is stored in the area under the belly
* To encourage intuition, as it drains the whirring energy in the head, bringing that down to create more non-conceptual states, to be more intuitive. We’re all intuitive but the rational mind can cut in, demand evidence and dismiss the intuition.
* It’s also used in traditions that focus on seeing through the subject-object duality, because there is something helpful about generating awareness in this area (below the navel)
* And it’s a very healing practice.

**04: Setting the context for receiving the stream of the Dharma**

Meditation including connecting with the circles of protection – the lotuses encourage practice with an open heart, the vajra wall encourages our practice to be both stable and dynamic, the wisdom flames encourage us to be bright, awake, clear and unconfused. We’re in the centre of the mandala practicing for ourselves, each other and the world. At the heart of the mandala are all the qualities of awakening – truth, peace, freedom and energy, embodied in the Buddha Shakyamuni, from whom comes a continuous flow of Dharma, awakened qualities and teachings to help us become that flow. The mantra helps us tune into that.

**First** **essential points for the mind– the three times**

These general points apply to Just Sitting, because they’re about not getting caught up in the three times:

*Do not pursue the past, do not pursue the future, settle in the cognizant yet non-conceptual state of the present consciousness.[[1]](#endnote-1)*

There are times even in meditation where you are intentionally reflecting on the past, such as reflection on impermanence, looking back on how you are the same and different and the changes over the years. You may want to go into the future to deepen your motivation, such as ‘supposing I had 10 years to live, how would I want to practice? Supposing I had five years to live, how would I want to practice? Supposing I had one week to live, how would I want to practice?’ That would be using reflection that included looking at the future. But fundamentally what this is about is that we are looking for mind to be flexible, and free, and not to get caught up in or fixated upon the past or the future or even on the present as an idea. That is the first essential point for the mind. These essential points never change, we can practice them for the whole of our life and they're part of the basis of the whole of Mahamudra. So, the basic instruction is don't get caught up in the past or in the future, just settle in the present, actual experience now, this current experience, more and more deeply.

*The past is finished, over and gone, there is nothing to think about.*

We can construct an idea about the past and we can create memories, but even that memory is a re-creation in the present. It's not as if we can actually go into the past, or that memory is some sort of storehouse that we can go into and come out again. This instruction is aiming to help us not get caught up in the past. Some people get caught in the past, in a loop, round and round, caught up in an event that happened in the past. Not that it was traumatic, but they are unable to let go, and keep trying to resolve something, but there is no real resolution. Although there is a need for sympathy, at some point it may be important to say that "the past is finished, over and gone, there is nothing to think about" as we also need to have that perspective.

*The future has not come yet, it does not exist, it is not an object, so it is pointless to investigate it.*

This is trying to bring us into our actual experience. A lot of meditation is about bringing us out of the realm of concepts and into our direct experience. When we are reflecting we use all of our experience; we go into thoughts of the past, ransacking our memories, and into the future to reflect on how things could still unfold, but if I’m doing Just Sitting or insight practice directly looking into how things are, then I'm coming down to what I can immediately experience. When I'm reflecting, I might think: "In Cambridge, two weeks from now, I shall do such and such" but when I'm practising with this direct insight approach, there is no such thing as Cambridge or two weeks from now. Where is it in the six senses? If I'm practising metta for all sentient beings, my heart would go out to beings in Syria, India and out and out, but if I'm practising with insight practice, then all sentient beings are us, and any birds that I can hear. This is it, this is what I can actually see, hear, taste, touch, smell and feel. This is what we work with. The practice is working with this immediate, direct experience.

This also helps to undercut the whole tendency of our society to be incredibly future orientated. It's difficult living in the West not to have the sense that happiness and fulfilment are always in the future. We often live our whole lives this way. It's always jam tomorrow not jam today. For example, when you're four years old, perhaps you think things will be great when I’m five, then later, when I'm in secondary school, or when I’m 18 and can do what I like, but life carries on and nothing is really that fulfilling. But you keep going and think "When I've got the house, when I've got the mortgage paid off, when I finally get the promotion, or find that someone to live with happily ever after…". We’re galloping along with this dangling golden carrot which is designed to go 1 mile an hour faster than us, however fast we go. You can spend your whole life chasing after the future and then realise that it seems to have turned into old age, sickness and death, and wonder where it was that we were headed.

The problem is that we transpose this on to the Dharma as well - that there is a path and you go through various stages until you gain enlightenment. Although that is true on one level, that reinforces the sense that this experience now is not important, that it is only a stepping stone to the experience you're going to have, which will be the *real* experience, where it *really* happens. That tendency of mind, which is so strong in the West, is what actually prevents this moment now from being *the* moment. It means we see our present experience just as instrumental; that we have this current meditation in order to have the next one and the next one and then the one in which it's all really going to happen. So that whole emotional setup needs dismantling. If we’re practising Just Sitting, at the beginning of the practice we do need to motivate ourselves and to feel we are moving towards awakening, but then we just sit with what is. It's better to think about awakening in terms of going deeply into the present moment; of awakening being the depth dimension of the present moment rather than it being far off on the horizon somewhere. One of the things that keeps getting in the way for people is thinking that *now* couldn't possibly be *it*, that it's all going to happen in some other place or time.

These instructions help take away that tendency of mind, so that we’re not leaning into the future in a way that takes us away from the present. If awakening is in the future, the way to get to it is by being fully immersed in each moment. And that's all that we need to do. Just as in caring for all beings, what I need to do is take care of the beings in front of me, in meditation and in Dharma practice, if I can just be fully present and care for this moment, and then be present with and care for the next moment, that’s it, that's all we have to do. Doing that will mean that things unfold more and more.

If we train ourselves in this way, it also undercuts a lot of anxiety, and the tendency of the mind to go off into the future and anticipate what is going to happen. We don't know what is going to happen in the future, or even in the next breath, but we create this whole emotional cinema in which we play out all kinds of different scenarios. Of course, this is a useful faculty to have, and we wouldn't have got ourselves to retreat without some future planning, but very often we are also using that faculty to scare ourselves. If I look at my life, there are some bad things that did happen, but there are also the bad things that I imagined would happen, and created stress and tension about, which didn't happen. What is all that about? Fundamentally, I just tortured myself.

When training ourselves in this way, we become more and more aware of whether mind is going into the past or the future, and if so whether it is doing so in a way that is helpful or whether it is useless and meaningless. So, if we’re aware that the future has not yet come, that cuts away a lot of hopes and fears – Mahamudra doesn't tend to talk in terms of craving and aversion, but about hopes and fears (though those are very connected). It's trying to bring us into a deeper relationship with what's actually going on, and the more that happens, the less we jump out of the present moment into the future, into wondering how things are going to go

*If you investigate the present, it is impossible to discern past and future moments in terms of many little fragments, because such entities do not really exist.*

If in your experience you can't find the past and you can't find the future, then what does the present mean? If you really investigate your experience, can you find fragments? Is the past broken up into little bits that have just fallen off, and now there’s the present moment and then is the future, which is something you can see coming towards you? And how big is the present moment? Is it very large or nano? You’re being invited to notice that all this is a conceptual construct which you're putting onto your experience. It's all a useful way of talking about things, but if we actually come down to our experience, we don't find any of these fragments. We don't find the past, because where is that? And we don't find the future, because there isn’t some kind of waiting room. Because we read from left to right it's as if we see the past to our left and the future to our right, but if we were Chinese, we might see the past as down and the future as up. We can begin to see that we develop ideas about how things are, which are very useful, but the problem is we then start taking them as how things actually are. A lot of the practice is about peeling back layers of ideas about how things are, to come to just simple experience. Reality isn’t cut up into bits. If we look at our experience, the best that we could say is that it's a flow.

Let’s think back to what we were doing (before the break). Let’s check experientially. What do we actually *do* when we think about that time 20 minutes ago? Are we going into the past when we do that? No, we’re thinking in the present. The past does mean something, or we wouldn’t have any record, but that record is a dependent arising now. So, we’re never actually leaving the present moment. If we think about tomorrow, that’s the same, we’re still thinking in the present. However, the issue isn’t whether we turn our mind now to what happened in the past or what we imagine will happen in the future - there are times when we’re in the past or future for very valid reasons - the issue is when we get caught up and start not having freedom or flexibility of mind. The problem is that, because we’ve lost track of how things really are, there’s a sense of tension and unsatisfactoriness in our experience, which leads to craving or aversion, which leads to going off into the past and future. We need to distinguish between a healthy faculty of using what we call memory and what we call imagination and being on the run from our present experience – running off as an avoidance because we can conjure up something more pleasant in the past or future. Part of that basic ignorance is that we’ve lost track of what is experience and what is ideas about experience.

Thinking can be very fulfilling – Cambridge, where I live, is full of people who are very engaged with thinking, and that can be a very helpful, human activity – but it’s unhelpful to produce thoughts about the past and future as a way of avoiding the present. All we are trying to do is arrive at a healthy functioning of all our faculties – our body, emotions, reason, imagination and intuition. When those are functioning appropriately and creatively, all is well, but there are other ways of using them which are not very fulfilling. For example, you can live in a largely conceptual world, which isn’t very fulfilling, not realising that you’re not fully alive. You live in a world of thoughts and images about life, which isn’t the same as actually living it, being in life. A thought about breakfast isn’t the same as actually eating that porridge or muesli, for example; they’re different. We just need to be very clear about the kind of experience we’re having and whether it’s fulfilling or not. This takes us into the nature of things, but fundamentally is considered here (in this quote from the shamatha section of the book) as a way to help settle the mind. We can use the filter of noticing where we are – have we gone into the past or future or are we in the present? and if we’re in the present are we thinking about it or actually experiencing it? That already cuts through an awful lot of being on the run from experience and the tendency of the mind to absent itself from what’s going on.

**The present as concept and direct experience**

The first aim is to settle the mind by being clear if we are in the past, present or future to see if we are in direct experience. This can get subtler and subtler, so part of it is catching conceptual overlays on our experience, like the wallpaper that’s always been there. There are levels of concepts – layers of wallpaper – and part of the practice is peeling them off to see the original brick. There can be clouds of concepts about what happened in the past, or future scenarios and hopes and fears, and you can take those apart but keep noticing subtler versions. One of these may be a sense of positioning yourself in a meditation - how long you’ve been meditating for, and how long there is still to go – which is another level of concepts we tend not to notice but that are a way of preserving a sense of ‘me’ doing the meditation instead of just being the meditation. Part of the art of meditation is catching those concepts and realising they’re just ideas or conceptual overlay, not something solid. They’re what we’re telling ourselves about what’s going on, more and more subtly. And we come right down to concepts such as time and space, self and other.

The aim of this is to enable the mind to become more flexible, to notice where it gets stuck on thoughts, and regain its freedom; when it gets stuck we lose our freedom. We learn in meditation to let go of ideas and concepts and be with direct experience and then see if that skill is useful in everyday life as well. Thinking, reflecting etc. are all useful but modern life encourages us to do it all the time and it gets so we can’t find the “off” switch, from when the alarm goes off in the morning until you’re trying to go to sleep at night, with thoughts still whirring. We need to learn to think clearly when we need to, with space around it and not getting caught up, but when we’ve thought something through, to relax back to simple experiencing: noticing where you are, colour, sound, textures, how the body feels – that the body isn’t just a car made of flesh that takes you from one appointment to the next, but all this richness. It’s about flexibility of mind and freedom.

*The present is beyond the reach of the objectifying intellect and can neither be thought of nor expressed in words.*

The Dharma in words isn’t ever how things are because you can’t capture how things are in words. But we use words to find a better concept than the current unhelpful concept. So, it’s helpful to think of coming into the present moment, into ‘now’; it’s very helpful to see that mind has gone into the past or future and bring it back to now. But that helpful concept can become unhelpful because we get fixated on it as an idea and instead of actually being settled in experience, we think about the present conceptually. So, the next thing is to examine what that term “present” means – what is now? I can’t find it. The words don’t do justice to the experience. We’ll never fully enjoy or appreciate – deeply experience – as long as we’re creating a split with ‘me’ experiencing the present and adding ideas about it. The aim is to keep noticing the wallpaper of ideas and letting them go and increasingly settle into simple experience as it is now. Because it can neither be thought of nor expressed in words.

I can look at an image of Manjushri and talk about him and that can be helpful but it’s all still concepts. They are all ideas about an ungraspable experience. The words never do justice to the experience. Even something as simple as the feeling of your right hand touching your face. You can find words, but they never really describe it. The text says *someone who experiences is like a mute who’s had a dream*. Words point us to an experience and help us communicate it to other people but are not the experience.

*This is why you should not involve yourself in the least with the distortions of grasping at characteristics such as “is or is not, it has or it has not, good and bad," but rather leave the mind, as it is, in its luminous and empty state, free from conceptual grasping, without trying to settle it.*

*Grasping at characteristics* means the whole conceptual superstructure which we put on to experience. We can add on anything from basic concepts to all sorts of judgements based on comparisons, such as comparing the colours and shapes in this Manjushri thangka with others we’ve experienced. There’s a lot of complexity and we’re skilled at producing those judgements, though we often don’t use them in a helpful way. Often, we compare ourselves with others, for better or worse, or compare our current experience with a past or anticipated experience. All this energy going into comparing, checking and judging - it’s tiring! And we build it just on the basis of colour and shape, for example. It can be wonderful, but I need to be able to *not* do it, to not compare myself with others, this meal with one four days ago, how life is going with how I think it should be. I need to be able to put all that down. The practice is giving us an opportunity to do that.

*Luminous* is not about light or colour but about the vivid quality of what appears in the mind. *Without trying to settle it -* why?When I start doing a body scan, I can find a bit that is tense and invite it to relax and perhaps it lets go, but beyond that, relaxation has to happen just by setting up the conditions. We can’t *make* ourselves relax and even trying to relax is still creating tension. We can only set up conditions, and at some point, there will be relaxation. For a long time, there is a ‘me’ working on my mind, concentrating on an object, but at a certain point ‘me the meditator’ becomes the obstacle. That aware person guiding the practice was a good thing, but it is now the problem. At that point, we need to allow that creation to relax, pension it off, send it on a cruise somewhere, because that setting up a goal becomes the problem. We need to trust that if we relax and don’t ask anything of mind, deeper qualities and experiences will manifest. That’s not easy, because up to now we’ve been in control and guiding things, so what’s going to happen? But we need to learn that when that way of functioning relaxes, what comes into play is fulfilling. That’s what is meant by not *trying* to settle the mind.

The koan is ‘how do you let go?’ because that’s more *doing*. So then you try relaxing and doing nothing for a bit and that doesn’t work, so then you try again… And there’s a fear, it can feel like going off a cliff edge, but fear and anxiety can be a really good sign. We need to bring kindly awareness to those blocks or fears. As the mind settles it can feel as if there is a non-conceptual inner compass helping you steer to the deep, but after a while there is no need for that either. With insight practice, any experience is suitable for looking into the nature of things so there’s no need to take mind into a special state. If you’re not wanting to do anything, the practice will guide itself – things are unfolding, and they have a sequencing that’s appropriate.

We set up the context before we start: within a sense of refuge, with a positive intention, and that influences the whole thing. But while you’re just sitting, you’re not trying to *do* anything, it’s about noticing where you’re holding on, where you’re conceptually caught up, where the tension is, etc. but it’s not as if you’re aiming to produce a particular state, so there is no right and wrong. That feels weird if you’ve done lots of structured practice. It helps to keep in touch with someone about your practice to see that things are unfolding, as the tendency may be for mind to drift. You get used to how grasping *feels* in yourself. You tune into that. That can be a sort of guide.

*The practice of mahamudra, the abiding nature, does not depend on cutting or not cutting the conceptual preoccupation with the three times. However, if beginners who are just starting to meditate do not stop their conceptualisations about the three times, concentration will not arise in them. Therefore, it is important to guide practitioners in this way, when they are applying the practice instructions.*

The Ocean of True Meaning is both a manual for practitioners and for teachers or guides. We know that mahamudra is about resting simply in experience as it is; there is nothing the matter with thoughts and, as we get more experienced, thought can actually be really helpful. The problem with thought is that we get identified with it - one thought leads to another thought which leads to 5 or 10 minutes lost in thought before there is another moment of awareness. So, when we’re just starting out and there is that tendency to be lost in thought, and for proliferation of thought, it is really helpful to have this mindfulness filter of noticing whether we’re in the past, future or holding onto the present in some kind of way.

We’ve seen that our aim in this kind of practice is to step out of conceptualisation and come into direct experience more and more. Even when we’re more or less in the present moment, we can have a subtle conceptual overlay of positioning ourselves in relation to the experience, such as when we’re meditating and have a sense of how far into the meditation we are and how much longer there is to go. When we notice those more subtle levels of conceptualisation, we can relax them because we don't need them. If we're doing just sitting meditation, we don't need to know where we are in the practice, and even with structured practice, it is often there more than it needs to be.

This sense of "me" passing through time is a way of holding onto ourselves – a subtle way of holding onto ourselves and reassuring ourselves that we exist in this moment. And we only know that we exist in this moment because we existed in the past and future, so we keep it going with this subtle level of concepts, but actually experience is much more fulfilling when we just relax that. We can keep finding subtle levels at which we're talking to ourselves, or framing the experience, and experience is more fulfilling when we catch those and see that it’s not necessary and allow it to fall away. If we lose interest in maintaining it, we discover that there is no need to maintain it. We can have really fulfilling, aware experience without having to talk to ourselves about it.

*Cutting preoccupation with the three times* means noticing that we've gone off into the future, recognising that that's not necessary and bringing ourselves back into the present. *Not cutting* is just allowing the mind to do whatever it wants to do without interfering in any way at all. The more you practise, the more cutting will happen by itself. When there is a lot of drifting, you can help the process along by reflecting that the prapancha is *meaningless, useless* and *essenceless*. For example, outside of meditation, there may be a point where thinking about what I'm going to be doing when I get back to Cambridge is a valid and useful thing to do, but in meditation, it is totally useless. And from the point of view of what I'm trying to achieve in meditation, it is totally meaningless. And if I look directly at it, then what is it I am preoccupied with? What is a thought anyway? What’s it made up of? If I look into that, maybe I find there is some movement of energy in the body, and some pictures and words. When I look directly at it, that is all there is. There’s nothing I can grasp hold of. If you work with those phrases to cut away at prapancha, that starts to penetrate into the mind and at some point, when some prapancha does start up, there is this awareness. To start with, the awareness may be accompanied by words: “this is useless, meaningless and essence-less”, but after a while there’s not even that - the prapancha is immediately followed by the vajra-chopper - it’s not as if you’ve actually decided.

We work in different ways at different times in meditation. For all of us at some time or other, some part of the process will be resolving past issues and freeing up the energy caught up in them. With this emotional work, turning towards what arises with kindness and care is part of the overall process of meditation. Where we are aiming to end up for all experience is with a combination of wisdom and compassion. So, the ideal approach with any experience, is with an open heart, but also with an awareness of its nature because that makes it easier to work with and respond to, to meet fully. If we're doing this kind of emotional work, and something comes up that is very strong, as well as kindness it is helpful to have a subtle awareness of its nature. That gives you more freedom to work with it.

We’re not aiming to set up some kind of opposition between emotional work, which we do with a lot of kindness, and this wisdom work which we do with a lot of cold cutting. It's not like that. It’s bringing the two together. Different people respond to different approaches, and in different ways at different times. For some it’s better to talk about softening or letting go, but for others, the chopper or sword will speak to them; the sword-image here is meant to evoke a subtle experience, analogous to cutting through silk, not anything harsh. Our overall attitude to ourselves needs to be of kindness, care and real patience with ourselves.

However, there is such tension set up in grasping at a thought or pushing it away, that kindness for ourselves includes being ‘tough on suffering and tough on the causes of suffering’; having a kindly attitude to yourself includes not giving a lot of leeway to what causes suffering for yourself. We can get a sense of the emotional tone of when we are being harsh or down on ourselves, or when something unhelpful comes up and you just kind of stamp on it. That can be an approach – powerful and energetic – but it’s still very much at the service of the love mode and of care for yourself.

We’re simply adding to our store of methods we can use. If we’re not identified with thoughts, we’re aware of what’s arising and when we become aware of any tendency to grasp it, we can relax that and not give it our attention. Just relaxing in relation to it, it will pass away; when the interest doesn’t go into it, the thought has to simply arise and pass away. You just relax in relationship to it, and let impermanence do its thing.

Another approach is to look directly at the thought, into its nature, at what you’re being caught up in. When you’re engaged in the meditation, a thought will just come and then pass and that’s not a problem. But eventually, a major thought arrives, with a cavalcade, claiming it’s very important and demanding attention, and you’re gone... But when you look into that big important thought, what is it actually? Some feeling tones, words, mental images - a cloud castle - there isn’t anything substantial there. In itself there is nothing about it that compels us to be involved. It’s the reality we’re giving it that compels us to get involved with it.

Gampopa says somewhere that thoughts are friends and benefactors – if you’re not caught up in them. We can think when we need to think, and not get lost in thought trains. So, we’ve explored three approaches we can use:

1) seeing thoughts as useless and meaningless while we are meditating,

2) relaxing in relation to thoughts, and

3) looking directly at the thought to see there is nothing to get hold of, that they’re flimsy, like a stage set.

**09: Focusing the mind on a visual object**

This approach is one of the methods used in *The Ocean of True Meaning* to concentrate ‘the mind that has not been concentrated’ – though absorption is a better word than concentration. The aim of meditation isn’t just to get good at sitting on a cushion. Meditation should be the easy bit. In meditation, we just sit quietly on a cushion somewhere and focus our minds on how to develop love and wisdom and, over time, we learn how to do that in activity. In the Mahamudra tradition, there were a lot of people doing long retreats, because they were followers of Milarepa, so they would spend years in a cave, until they felt they’d established something, then come out and their teacher would encourage them to go into the town and see if they had managed to develop those qualities to the point where they were sustainable under those circumstances – sometimes they had and other times not, and they would go back to the cave. Our aim isn't just to be good at sitting on a cushion; our aim is to take all of this into life and see if we can be part of the solution rather than part of the problem – the Bodhisattva Ideal. This tradition puts emphasis on working with sense experience and then taking those relaxed states into more and more challenging situations.

We start with working with open eyes and learning how to be in relaxed, aware, non-grasping, non-tense states whilst taking in visual objects, so we can sit on the Tube in London and still be relaxed and aware, for example. It’s about training to experience in a relaxed way. Modern life makes us hyper-vigilant and pulled around, such as by advertising, which has developed expert ways to catch our attention. We need to get good at not having our attention constantly pulled in or repulsed. That’s the object of the exercise. It seems nothing special, but if we can learn to stay relaxed in relation to visual objects, it will have a really good effect on our minds.

*Focusing the mind on a large object: correctly adopt the key points of the body posture and the gaze and direct your attention and your gaze one pointedly to any clear visual object, which happens to be in front of you, such as a pillar, a wall or a mountain. Stay steadily on it without getting distracted by anything else*.[[2]](#endnote-2)

We’re not interested in the detail of the object; it’s just something to let the mind rest on. The object itself could be anything. We’re learning not to be drawn out by the object. We spend a lot of our lives in ‘hunter-gatherer mode’, seeing whether something is of interest, whether there is something in it for us. We’re constantly differentiating – there are things that are helpful for the ego project, there are things that are a threat to the ego project and there is everything else, which we are indifferent to because it has no relevance to the ego project. We’re learning to even out all that by just letting the gaze rest.

Bhante gave a lecture many years ago called *Mind Reactive and Creative*. The reactive mind is compelled to react to whatever is coming through the senses with craving or aversion, or to dull out if there's nothing interesting going on. The mind and the visual sense seem to have quite a strong connection, so simply relaxing the gaze can have quite a strong effect on the mind. While out walking, practice resting the gaze on a hill or large rock, for example. Even over lunch, or in a meeting, we can just let our gaze rest on something in front of us and really relax the eyes.

Note: Any bodily posture will do as long as you can be relaxed and aware in it. Impure just means an ordinary object (rather than a Buddha or Bodhisattva).

**10: Focusing the mind on an impure outer object** (cont’d)

*Leave the mind natural because if your focus on the object is very tense, it will cause more mental activity. Not allowing any wandering off to other objects, stay one-pointedly on your object. Completely relaxed but undistracted. Without thinking about its size, length or colour, stay natural and undistracted and do not allow the rope of mindfulness to be cut. Since this object is just a reminder to support undistracted mindfulness, simply direct your gaze undistractedly at the object and stay relaxed. There’s nothing to meditate on about the object.*

The text differentiates between advice for beginners, those with more experience and advanced practitioners. However, the reality is that we are different at different times. Sometimes we might be doing really well, and other times feel right back to how we were when we first walked into a Buddhist centre. Part of the art is knowing where we are and applying ourselves appropriately. When we start practicing, there is a big tendency to get lost in thought, so the task is to develop mindfulness. We develop an observer who then guides our practice in helpful directions – like a Dharma ego – there’s still self-reference but it's a helpful self (or ego) making sure things go in the right direction. But we don't want that to be too tight. It's possible to be so hypervigilant with your own experience, out of a kind of horrified anxiety, that you turn your mind into some kind of police state, watching for any small sign of anything that’s unskilful or going in the wrong direction. That will create more tension.

We need that observer, at that point in our practice, but we don't want it to be too solid; as much as possible we need to keep it light because where we’re going to end up is a place that will feel very light, carefree and easy. We set up that observer and mindfulness, but there comes a point where it becomes redundant and we don't need it because the positive flow of mind is unfolding. At that point, the next stage of the path is letting go of that self-reference, even to a positive self who is aiming to gain enlightenment. But that self who is aiming to gain enlightenment can't abolish itself. If you become aware of the observer and try to get rid of it, you just create another observer behind it, and another behind that. What needs to happen, over a period of time, is that through seeing things unfolding by themselves without the need for an observer, it can simply relax and then tends to fall away by itself. But we can’t make it fall away, because that will just stir up mind more.

At that point, there is simply an aware flow without reference back to a central HQ or observer; at least for a moment or two, that self-reference isn’t there. We notice after the experience that the observer was missing, that there was just aware experience. Sometimes people get confused because that can look, at least in theory, like being lost in thought. Initially we’re lost in thought, then there’s a mindful, aware observer, then the observer seems to dissolve back into the flow – speaking conventionally – but the feeling of that is completely different. Being lost in thought feels very heavy but the feeling of being completely in the flow of life and aware, when you come out of it, feels very light and vivid – there’s a lightness and brightness. The flow is aware but not divided, as we haven’t set up an observer to watch. Even in dhyana, there is a subtle observer – the meditator and the meditative state. In this, there is no one absorbed in anything. There is just aware experience with no reference back to a ‘you’ that’s having the experience.

So, we need a sense of how mind is functioning now, to know what to do. If mind is producing lots of thought chains, we need to strengthen the mindfulness and observer, but when mind is happily settled, there is no need to sustain that; we just let ourselves relax fully into experience. With this kind of practice, we’re learning that there is no need to react or get drawn in. We’re deconditioning ourselves. In the seen just the seen, in the heard just the heard, without adding to experience. There’s something satisfying about it. What we’re resting attention on tends to become clear, but with enjoyment of that relaxation. We’re learning to experience sense experience without our mind being drawn out to it.

For example, if we take a pen and ask ourselves "what's this pen like?", Then our mind goes out to it and says, for example, it's metallic, or plastic, or such-and-such a size – it gets involved in the details. Alternatively, we can ask "how is it to be experiencing this pen?" and that will give a different kind of direction of attention and will produce a different result. The latter is more directed to mind and how it is, where the former is taking us out to the object - what's it like? do I like it or not? how does it compare to other similar objects? what use can I make of it? The feeling that we are looking for is that of "how is it to be seeing this?" It's inviting us to stay more with how experience is and how the mind is than out to the object.

There is a relationship between the amount of effort made and the solidity of the object.

Also, intimacy, peacefulness and a sense of how we experienced things as young children. No need to define it. We can focus somewhere beyond the object and move our eyes a bit, so they don’t feel tired or sore, relax the muscles around the eyes and don’t forget to blink. But it’s best just to do it for short periods. If your mind is very active, you can meditate on a large bowl of clear water – rest your gaze on still, clear water.

**11 Focusing the mind on a (small) impure outer object**

*Focusing on a small object: hold the mind either on a small 4-inch piece of wood or small pebble in front of you, whichever is suitable.*

Focus on something small, such as a pen, at a comfortable distance and make sure you’re settled. Anything small will do if you can comfortably hold it or place it in front of you. The aim isn’t to investigate what pens are like or to produce any special experience; the object is just something to allow our gaze to rest on as we let our mind be relaxed and aware. If you relax your eyes too much, you may lose focus, so you need to work the eyes enough to keep the object in focus but allow the mind to be relaxed in relation to it. We’re not going out to the object or trying to draw the object in, we’re becoming more aware of how the mind is. It can become more of a purely aesthetic experience, but we’re not pursuing that. It becomes more intimate as the distance between subject and object gets less, so there is an intimacy with experience. We’re looking for that with life as a whole.

**12 Chapter 5 – intuitive insight - Examining the nature of mind, as it is**

The aim is to develop what Bhante calls “direct, intuitive insight”. There are different ways we can do that – by reflecting, so out of that comes a deeper experience, or by going to the experience itself and seeing what’s there. We’re going to explore as directly as we can – the texts uses words like ‘looking’ and ‘seeing’, which is natural as seeing is such a strong sense, but the terms may not work for everyone. The aim is to actually *have* the experience, not just an idea, however clear and wonderful, so we actually *know* how things are. For example, knowing a lot about Vajraloka is not the same as sitting in the shrine room. It’s a different kind of knowing and gives a lot more confidence.

The usual word for Mind in Sanskrit is *Chitta*: heart-mind. As we go into this work, it can start to sound cold and rational as we’re having to see through and get underneath our stories and see how things really are. It’s actually all about experience. When we experience the nature of mind as it is, that has a profound effect on how we live our life, how we feel about how we are in the world, and how we are with what we think of as ‘other people’ and the ‘world out there’. It’s not a cold or rational business. To do it we have to really plunge into our experience – to plunge into life.

As Buddhists we spend a lot of time exploring how mind works, such as the 51 mental states, whether our mental states are skilful or skilful, both in and out of meditation. But here we’re looking at mind *as it is*; the real fundamentals of what mind is. We’re looking to see the common factors in all our experience of mind. This is sometimes called the essence of mind, but we will find that mind doesn’t really have any essence, so ‘nature of mind’ is a better term. It’s like looking at the sky – sometimes there’s rain or snow coming down, or it’s cloudy, or clear, or all those in one day. We can get engaged in what the weather is like and the changes, but we can also ask what the sky is like in itself – what common factors are there? What’s always there? Then we can go on to explore how the ‘clouds’ arrive and where they go.

*Briefly carry out the preliminary practices without forgetting the exercises of calm abiding. First relax the mind loosely in its natural state and let it rest in this manner: leave the mind clear and radiant like the sun free from clouds. Leave it like water and waves, knowing all arising perceptions to be mind. Be like a child seeing paintings in a temple, clear perception without grasping.[[3]](#endnote-3)*

You set up the conditions, perhaps by Going for Refuge or cultivating Bodhicitta. We’re aiming to produce a state of mind that is stable and calm enough to be able to look into its nature. We don’t need dhyana, some thinking is fine, but we need a degree of stability of mind to be quiet enough to avoid the tendency that, when we look, we’re still subtly producing Buddhist thoughts about what we’re going to find. Once we have some experience, we tend to know a lot of the answers, which is great for study but not so useful for going deeply into the nature of experience; it’s easy to come up with the right answer without having the full experience or really knowing. We can metaphorically refer to the back of the book and confirm our preconceptions, rather than looking with an open mind and just seeing what’s there. The text talks about distinguishing between people who can give a good Dharma discourse and those who have directly seen the nature of mind, even if they can’t describe it well. *(caution about email inquiry and people teaching without having really seen)*.

We want to look really freshly. Even if we’ve had a genuine experience before, we need to guard against the tendency to bring an experience we had say six months ago into the present. For example, when strong emotion arises, you may bring in the memory of having seen that there is no need to react, which has some benefit and is bringing in Right View, but better still is to look again freshly at your experience. That’s more effective. We want to keep looking freshly at our experience. Who knows what we’ll find? Let’s look. Then we keep coming to life and coming into a full experience, rather than going back to a past experience and risking building a new identity as ‘someone who knows’, which isn’t helpful. Unless you have an exceptional insight experience, you need to keep on looking, until it’s so clear that the looking stops by itself because we just know this is how it is.

*Leave the mind clear and radiant like the sun free from clouds –* bright, not dull.

*Leave it like water and waves, knowing all arising perceptions to be mind.* If you’ve not done much insight work, you may not know *all arising perceptions to be mind,* but this is about letting mind movements arise and pass, just as water isn’t disturbed by its waves.

*Be like a child seeing paintings in a temple, clear perception without grasping* – this is one of my favourite meditation instructions. Looking at the figures here in the shrineroom, I’m ‘one who knows’, but a child in here would just look, without producing stories, letting experience happen without grasping or attachment. When your karmic fireworks are going off and there’s a display of strong emotions, you can either get identified with that or be like the child looking at the paintings and go ‘wow! I’m getting amazingly worked up about that!’, without getting caught up.

**13** **Examining the nature of mind, as it is**

*While in this state, investigate minutely [intimately, up close] your calm mind. What is its essence? What colour does it have? What form does it have, what kind of shape, what appearance? Is it something material or not? Where has it first come from, where does it stay now, where does it finally cease? Is it in the body? Does it exist in any form in the names, the inner and outer matter and in the six kinds of living beings? If you do find that it has such and such a colour, shape and essence, very good. If you cannot find anything, do not get discouraged. Enquire into it again and again with great perseverance.*

What’s mind like when it’s not producing thoughts? What is mind always like, whatever mental state is there? This extract starts with the questions that Milarepa gives the shepherd boy in *The Shepherd’s Search for Mind*. You can say the sky is cloudy, but the clouds aren’t always there – they’re not it’s nature. There are a range of answers but what is essential is that you really look, that you learn to look and to explore into your experience in an unbiased way, taking a really fresh look, rather than bringing in ideas about experience. At times that will show up another set of concepts; as we go deeper into experience, we see that was just a layer of ideas we had about experience.

It’s hard to express the looking in words. For example, if I look at these flowers, there’s a sense of just being as fully with/ in the experience as I can. Then I may notice ideas coming in and I need to take off those labels – that these are flowers, they’re yellow, that I’m looking at them – they’re just words. It’s not about the eyes particularly. There comes a point where there’s a kind of knowing of this that isn’t the usual ‘me looking at a flower’. The inquiries are just pointers – ways to get you to look at experience, ways to lower you into the stream of your experience. You take the questions lightly. In other approaches, you can take a question and push with it, but in this approach, we’re staying very relaxed, letting the mind rest and be calm, then in that state, just taking a look. That is a more effective approach than pushing, which creates tension and a stronger subject-object split.

*(In response to questions)* We start by looking at the calm state, but what we find should also apply when we’re really dull, for example. There can be a recognition, a resonance, an unfolding into the nature of the mind, a knowing this is right. That’s how you know – you just know - its direct and intuitive.

**14** *Briefly carry out the preliminary practices:* A lot of people working with this material will be on retreat, so will have plenty of meditation time and can do a lot before getting on to the nature of mind, such as guru yoga and sadhana, having a connection with adhisthana within which to do this work. It’s important to keep all the strands of practice together, rather than separating out particular approaches to insight or sadhana. There may be times of focusing on a particular area, and people have their own psycho-spiritual make-up so will emphasise different practices more, but the practice goes best when you do them all and they reinforce each other.

If you get really into one aspect of experience, another can go thin. Being into the rational aspect through study, you can lose connection with the heart, or you can get really into the heart and not want to have to get clear; or really into body sensations and imagination gets thin or into imagination and sadhana and take off from the body and not be grounded or able to integrate experience. it’s a natural tendency, and inevitable to some extent, but we want to be careful not to dismiss other aspects of practice, as we’d be dismissing or cutting off aspects of ourselves and it’s not as effective. As human beings we have physical, rational, imaginative, intuitive and emotional experience and when those are all in the same direction and we’re in touch with them all, practice has a tremendous momentum to it. We want the whole mandala of experience reinforcing how we’re practicing.

Some Mahamudra texts say this way of looking depends on and comes out of devotion. The more we can open to that dimension of experience, the easier it is to see the nature of things. And the more clearly you see how things are, see that there is no self, that sets up the conditions for great heart-opening and the Bodhisattva path - to really be of benefit to the world - and for all the deeper qualities of mind to be *unleashed*. Unleashed is a good word. All those qualities are held back because we have lost track of our experience and see ourselves as this small isolated ‘me’ in here, peering out anxiously at the world out there. Once that dissolves away, there is the opportunity for the richness of mind to come into play – to unfold those qualities of awakening to be of benefit to this suffering, suffering world. It’s all aiming at freeing us, so we can help other beings to be free.

Words like ‘investigate’ and ‘analyse’ can sound rational, but that’s not what it’s about. It’s about becoming intimate with experience. If someone asks what the sea is like, you can take samples and send them to a lab, but this is inviting you to dive in and then you *know* what the sea is like. That’s what this is asking us to do; to dive into our experience. Our mind tends to get fascinated by the *content* of experience and not look at the *nature* of experience. For instance, getting caught up in what’s happening in our lives and not noticing that another year has passed. Insight practice is about learning not to get caught up in the content but to look – or dive - deeply into the nature of it. Learning to just be with something in a relaxed way without being compelled to go into the detail, helps us see the nature of mind. If we understand the nature of mind we understand the nature of all experience.

We can talk about the nature of ‘mind’, or ‘awareness’, or ‘experience’, or the heart (though that may lead off somewhere else). In order to understand what Zen calls ‘the great matter of life and death’, it helps to relax and not take everything so seriously. That sense of separate self – that great fiction – sustains itself partly on drama. Melodrama is great: Feeling angry or amazing, you get a strong sense of ‘me’ in here. It keeps that sense of ‘Yes, I’m here, I know I am because I feel strongly’. Yet there can be a relaxed intensity, to quote Hsu Yun, the great Ch’an master: ‘you should live as if you were going to live for 1,000 years and not waste a moment’ – a sense of putting down that rushed, driven, busy feel but also not wasting time.

To practise, try and find a question where there is curiosity, interest and energy, then calm the mind and explore that, to become intimate with our experience. The text offers a range of possibilities to point us to our experience and invite us to explore:

*What is its essence? What colour does it have? What form does it have, what kind of shape, what appearance? Is it something material or not? Where has it first come from, where does it stay now, where does it finally cease? Is it in the body? Does it exist in any form in the names, the inner and outer matter and in the six kinds of living beings?*

**16** There is now a volume of *The Ocean of True Meaning* available to buy.[[4]](#endnote-4) Brief recap, agreeing there is no colour, shape, size or location to mind. Can we say it’s limitless, or that it moves around? Wouldn’t that mean it was in space? Is space part of what mind produces rather than its nature? We don’t need answers, just to explore how we’re experiencing it. The analogy of the sky is not about the limitlessness – as that implies an entity – but about the ungraspability. We can explore it all in experience and start to lose assumptions about how it is and to move from the world of concepts into experience. This can seem abstract but the whole point is to relieve our dukkha – it’s about seeing how we operate so we stop creating suffering in our experience. We need to make links, so we can see how that happens in our experience, how we’re creating suffering for ourselves by getting lost in ideas about how things are. Mind has lost track of its own nature and become identified with the body, emotions and thinking. It’s like the sky becoming identified with a cloud. That identification creates tension, which we build on with concepts and try to alleviate by pushing and pulling at experience. But the sky doesn’t mind what’s there – whether birds, planes, storm clouds or rainbows.

With all these concepts and images, we’re using helpful stepping stones. We get caught seeing things a certain way – framed in images and words – then need to free ourselves a bit. If we can’t move directly into experience we can find another subtler concept that’s truer, at least on the relative level, which helps us move more directly into life. The same with images. In freeing ourselves we’re putting helpful concepts and ways of approaching things in place. Separating out concepts and ideas from actual experience is a helpful one that we need to keep working with. As is looking at the nature of things, not just the content.

If we look into the nature of things rather than the content, we find that nothing has a true nature, any core inherent existence, that it’s empty – shunya. In the West, because we often go to dark places in ourselves, we have to remind ourselves that ‘empty’ is not a black hole experience. It’s just that something we assumed was there isn’t there. For example, if I think Subhadra is in the kitchen, I go into the kitchen and look and see he isn’t there. There may be other people in there and there’s certainly lots of *stuff* there – it’s not empty nothingness – there’s lots of aliveness there, but something I assumed was there, when I look I find isn’t there. In the same way, when we look we find experience – colour, life – but no core essence of that person or thing that we can get hold of. ‘Ungraspable’ is a loose but more helpful translation than ‘empty’. There’s nothing we can grasp; however hard we try.

*(In response to questions/ comments)* We have views and assumptions that can be exposed when we look. It can be helpful to ask: ‘what must I believe on some level, to be acting like this?’ Either part of me must not believe that craving leads to suffering or there is an unquestioned belief that acting like this will turn out well. Getting to these views is an important part of the practice. How we lead our lives provides evidence for what we believe. We can believe lots of contradictory things (before breakfast) and those different voices and parts need to meet one another and be brought into the practice. The bit of me that believes I can practice the Dharma fully while wasting time in various ways – the inconsistencies we manage to work around. Some beliefs really don’t serve us, and we need to dig into them. Perhaps we believe in awakening but not our ability to awaken. We need to make these views conscious and be in dialogue with them.

We don’t want to get into tension with the arising of thoughts as that creates more tension. Relaxing in relation to them is better, and there can be a lot to be learnt from thoughts to expose views, but thoughts are also another demonstration of how things are – a display of the mind - and each thought is an opportunity to see that it’s just flowing and has no substance.

**Seeing that our experience is our experience**

Another aspect of looking at the nature of things, not just the content, which is helpful as we explore – though it initially sounds like nothing - is really *seeing that our experience is our experience*. Life, the world and other people help us do this at a certain level, such as when we have a conversation with someone and compare our experiences and see that they’re different. We might find that somebody sees themselves as the centre of the world, where we actually see ourselves at the centre of the world. Really meditating and reflecting on that can have quite an effect, because it seems so right, natural and obvious that we’re at the centre of the world, that other people thinking that they are is quite a challenge to our view of things. That is one level. But here we are talking more about the fact that everything that we experience is an experience of mind, or awareness. We can't actually say what things are like in themselves and, from a Dharma point of view, we’re not actually interested in what things are like in themselves. What we're concerned about is relieving the dukkha, or tension, in our experience. And we can do that by looking at our experience.

It’s very helpful to be aware that all that we’re experiencing is interpreted and built up by mind. Modern science is increasingly similar to the Yogachara, as it discovers more and more that what we experience is fabricated – that what comes through the senses is built up into a coherent sense of the world in all sorts of ways. I’d invite you to just keep noting that what you’re experiencing is actually an experience of your own mind; when you look at the hills, what you're experiencing is your own awareness, the same when you pick up a knife and fork. In a way we know this, but often we’re not thinking in those terms. We need to keep feeling into the fact that we are living in awareness; that all our experience is an experience of awareness. As Bhante once said in a seminar, "all we perceive is perceptions".

**17** It’s common to find it easier to have a sense of our experience as our experience with sound and body sensations than the visual sense; with the visual sense there is more discriminating and labelling. The exercise we did before helps (focusing the mind on an impure outer object) – learning to take in visual stimuli without doing anything about them – a training to just let the visual sense be. Along with all the concepts we have about the visual field, we can also have the concept that it is our heart-mind we’re experiencing; if we’re going to conceptualise, we might as well use helpful concepts. You can be aware that the experience you’re having is conditioned by the sense organ itself (e.g. your eyes/vision), and then there’s your emotional responses and then the ideas and concepts we bring. So, what we take for granted as *the way things are* is actually conditioned at a number of stages in the process.

There is a level of normal concepts “this is me walking through the landscape” which, with mind opening, aren’t there and you can end up feeling you’re not moving but the landscape is. This is similar to the Polynesian wayfinders, who had the view that they were not moving but just steering their stationary boats and eventually the islands came to them. This quality of letting life come to us and flow by is very different to the usual Western way of leaning into it, and has a different effect on the mind and body.

A way of looking where you keep asking in response to any experience ‘where does it appear?’ and keep persisting and looking, can be a helpful approach for some people, though it’s not the only way.

When you start working with the idea that whatever is experienced is an experience of mind – my mind – then what you’re looking at is as much your mind as is a thought or body sensation. Then you look at another person and wonder ‘in what way is another person ‘other’?’. All of you (in front of me now) are just as much part of my experience as a thought I’m thinking. At that point, it’s good to rest and let that have its effect. The tendency is to jump into ideas and questions. What we’re always experiencing is our own mind, perception, awareness. Perhaps there is no ‘other’. Resting in that is helpful and counteracts the imbalance we have with our tendency for producing more concepts and discriminating. We’re coming home. We’re never going out of the heart-mind. We’re never experiencing anything ‘other’ and we’re intimately connected to everything and everyone. If we can rest in that, it can counteract a lot of deep dukkha. There will be time to work out the philosophical implications later. What we’re looking for is to come to an experience which is fulfilling, which we rest in, and in which we don’t create dukkha.

There is an increasing sense of meeting experience and there’s a sense of recognition. More and more, meeting experience is like meeting an old friend, because you’re meeting your own mind. Even ‘intimacy’ isn’t strong enough, but it’s a good word. Along with that there’s a love and care that is natural and not forced. We care for what we see as pertaining to us. For example, I cut my head recently and I naturally care for my head, so I don’t need to make an effort to care. When we recognise that everything is our heart-mind, it starts to become natural that there’s a caring and love for whatever’s arising in the heart-mind. *Eternity is in love with the products of time* (William Blake). It’s as if mind is giving birth to all this richness – the hills, the wind, the people – and there’s a natural caring for all that. Perhaps there’s an object we have had for a long time and care for, and there’s something satisfying in that. We don’t need to produce metta. All experience starts to feel like an old friend. Though there is no ‘me’ caring for ‘it’ – the experience naturally has a quality of loving care. Understanding how things are and loving care go together, they’re not separate.

Sometimes you can become aware of how everything is your experience. For example, if you have a good Metta meditation, you feel warm and bright inside and afterwards everything you perceive is lit up by the Metta and seems lighter, brighter and warmer as you walk through it. Experience is affected by how you use the mind. In terms of overcoming dukkha, often we feel powerless in relation to things – outnumbered 7 billion to one on the planet, little me in here trying to get by – but if we get a sense that everything we are dealing with is our heart-mind, we can see that so much more will be changed by the work we do on our mind than we realise. So, this way of working can be very empowering.

Using the term ‘heart-mind’ in this context is because talking about ‘mind’ can seem dry. We start every session with mantras and offerings because the tradition sets this insight work in an imaginal, devotional context. In the West this really needs to be there, or we can get to somewhere that’s very desiccated. Although there’s a conceptual element in sadhana, we operate in different ways at different times and it’s also good to be aware that those figures are also our experience. So, for example, Padmasambhava has all these qualities, but where are they? Actually, that too is our experience – those qualities aren’t ‘other’ either. The more we keep all that in the picture, the less danger there is of narrowing down to something that isn’t satisfying or ignores all our richness as human beings.

**19** That sense of always being at home and not separate develops into the Bodhisattva Ideal; there’s a natural love and compassion that comes out of our experience, of feeling on the same side as what we think of as other beings and of life. It gets easier to see there’s no separation. When there’s that experience of no separation, because it’s all an experience of the heart-mind, there’s also no need to grasp at anything. Dharma practice is getting us to full enjoyment of things without the tension of grasping at it or having to pull it in. Sadhana gives us an experience of something very attractive but it’s clear we can’t grasp at it because it’s made of light. We’re discovering a way of appreciating and enjoying without the tension of grasping.

We start to explore using what is still definitely a concept, and at some point things tend to open up and we have an experience of insight – usually little glimpses – and the tendency is to go back into ideas or come up with questions. That takes us back into a different world. When things open out, it’s better to leave the questions to one side and let the experience settle. The self wants to know and have and understand because then it feels safe. So as soon as the selfing tendency starts up again, there’s a desire to understand it and fit the experience into a rational structure. The insight is on a level the rational mind doesn’t understand, which is scary for the rational mind, so its tendency is to tidy up the experience or question it and raise contradictions. All that will reinforce the selfing tendency. We’re highly skilled at labelling, identifying and analysing. What we need is the skill to let go and experience in non-conceptual ways. When we find ourselves in that tendency, we need to try and relax into it and experience it. We have ways of knowing that aren’t via thinking or analysing – we just know.

Just Sitting is a helpful practice to prepare us for being with non-conceptual insight. Come back to the poem *Monet refuses the operation* – there are other ways of seeing, a whole expanse of experience that becomes accessible as we move into a non-conceptual way of being. Insight happens in the absence of mind doing its selfing thing, so it has to be taken off guard. It’s always going to surprise us. We need to keep looking and being open to experience.

Going back to the shamatha section of the book:

*If you do not stir up the water, it is transparent. Similarly, you should leave the mind unaltered. Like the sun unveiled by clouds, leave the six senses unobstructed, as they are. Stay at all times and during all activities undistracted.[[5]](#endnote-5)*

These three negations can be expressed positively:

* Unaltered means *natural*, not manipulating the mind or fabricating anything
* Unobstructed means *free and open* - allowing awareness to move freely between the senses, not limiting the mind
* Undistracted means *aware* - staying with the experience as it is; it's possible to be undistracted without having any particular focus, being aware of whatever is arising in the moment.

Very often our attempts at absorption are very effortful and if you squeeze the mind it tends to produce more thoughts because it doesn't like being squeezed or limited. It produces thoughts either to try and solve the problem or to take you out of the unpleasant experience of being squeezed. With Just Sitting, when we are leaving the mind unaltered, there can be a greater risk of prapancha, but when the mind is settled enough to avoid that, then it can be more relaxed because it doesn't need to produce an observer to check whether the process is going in the right direction, because there isn't a need to go in a right direction, other than be undistracted with what is. With practice, with allowing that sense of relaxation, what arises is itself aware.

We only need to be aware *now*. When you relax the effort and let go, the experience comes to you; it can just happen. Less is more. There is no sense of ‘me’ trying to see or listen. We have eyes and ears that function, so there is experience which has awareness in it. We let life come to us in this practice. In Tibetan the word for meditation (*gom)* can be translated as ‘familiarisation’. With meditation, we become familiar with these other ways of functioning – being aware and allowing experience to unfold. It’s not what we’re used to as a way of functioning, so we have to become familiar with it. Which is why we spend so many hours on our cushions.

**20** Brief recap – we’ve been learning about:

1. Distinguishing between concept and direct experience;
2. With insight, being able to look into the nature of our experience rather than the content;
3. Seeing that nothing has any essential nature that we can point at or grasp;
4. That doesn't mean that there is just nothing, because this mind or awareness gives rise to whole worlds of experience, richness, creative energy and the display of appearances in the senses.

Coming back to the child in the temple, it's not that the child is looking at the paintings and thinking "I don't know what this is" but "Isn't this amazing! Isn't this extraordinary!". As we practice in this way, letting the discriminating mind settle more and more, it's as if that freshness and sense of worlds being produced comes back more and more. Newness and freshness is one of the qualities.

This is another aspect of sadhana; first you let go into the vast blue sky and that takes you into an experience that’s in the direction of the ungraspable nature of mind. Then that limitless awareness starts to produce a world as, in that blue sky, a lotus appears, and then a moon mat and then a figure. In that way we can learn to experience without grasping, because it's easier to see the ungraspable nature of that imagined experience than of this seemingly solid world that we inhabit a lot of the time. It shows us how mind creates worlds to live in. Depending on the drives behind it, we either create worlds that are satisfying to live in or worlds that are very difficult. With sadhana, we can train our minds to produce worlds that are increasingly direct, pure and fresh. Sadhana is a demonstration of how things really are. We watch as our mind produces a world, and then at a certain point that world fades away. Then out of the blue sky we create a world of coming out of meditation and of people around us. Yet the world that we create at that point is fundamentally of the same nature as the world that we create in the sadhana.

**21** When awareness alights on a self of sense, that’s just like anything else and doesn’t need to be shunted off to the side-lines. Whatever it is, it’s still awareness/heart-mind expressing itself as part of a world. I need to be able to distinguish between different worlds, such as a dream, waking experience or fantasy (if I can’t, I need treatment!) but whatever is going on is awareness expressing itself as a world. At the end of today I shall lay my head on the pillow and the waking world (of Vajraloka) will disappear and at some other point there will be all kinds of strange worlds, characters, scenarios and backdrops appearing; then I’ll wake up again and the retreat world will reappear. Then maybe, while out for a walk, I get flattened by a runaway tractor and this whole world I feel I’ve been experiencing for 67 years will go and mind will create another world out of habitual tendencies in what we call the *bardo*. But it’s always of the same nature - ungraspable, open awareness appearing as whatever is going on right now.

The same with sense of self; all we need is to know its nature. Once we know the nature of something, there is no difficulty. Sometimes when we see into the nature of something, it vanishes. But if it’s still there, we know its nature. It’s like lucid dreaming. As soon as we know it’s a dream it doesn’t matter if there’s a charging elephant, for example, because we know its nature.

It’s good to alternate between practices where we’re consciously creating or directing things so the worlds we create become more satisfying and fulfilling – such as sadhana - and practices where we’re really relaxing and letting go. The all-accomplishing wisdom of Amoghasiddhi is a wisdom that comes from there being no subject acting on an objective world. That action is spontaneously helpful but with no sense of deliberate, willed action, even for the good. There’s no need. When there isn’t a subject-object split happening, what comes out is automatically beneficial.

**22** *Summary of what we’ve done during the week, then*

Mahamudra 4-line summary, to give a sense of the overall picture of which we’ve touched on some aspects:

1. *Everything is mind* – everything is awareness/heart-mind (Yogachara aspect)
2. *Mind is empty* – shunya – or ‘ungraspable’ (Madhyamaka aspect)
3. *Mind appears as endless unobstructed forms* – awareness and appearance are inseparable - seeing through the subject-object split/duality and not being identified with what arises. The most fundamental level we need to see through is that of a ‘me’ identified with or being aware of an experience. This takes us away from the (relatively helpful) concept of mind as a vast container of experience. ‘Unobstructed’ points to the orderliness of experience, arisings flowing without ever colliding with one another.
4. *All these appearances self-liberate* (liberate themselves by themselves) – on one level, what arises also passes away, if we don’t cling to and put energy into them – but it goes deeper than that because everything appears knowing its own nature and transforms into the next experience with no holding, craving, or anyone doing anything. It’s naturally free.

**23 Setting the material in the context of Triratna; possible difficulties and advantages of this kind of approach**

Difficulties or issues:

1. All this is set in a Triyana framework with a traditional Indo-Tibetan view and this is not how Bhante sees and approaches things these days. However, the shamatha and vipashyana sections are just very experiential, looking at mind and body and how you use them to be free. Those chapters don’t have any Tantric content – except at one point: visualising the Buddha to settle the mind…
2. He is also wary of people taking on this kind of approach and doing a lot of Just Sitting when they don’t have any stability, so they’re just doing ‘klesha soup’ - if you just sit without any awareness, then your mind will just do what it's done since beginningless time and that hasn't yet led to awakening so there's no indication that it will now…
3. You can use this approach for spiritual bypassing. For example, if you have an emotional experience you don't like the look of, you can apply this view to see that ‘it's all empty and if I leave it alone it will self-liberate anyway’, which is really a misunderstanding of what the text is saying. However, we have to be aware that if we teach anything, then we also invite any misunderstandings connected with it. Taken right, seeing the true nature of whatever habit or tendency we have can really take some of the fixedness, heaviness and difficulty out of it and make it easier to come into relationship with it, to turn towards it and for it to transform.
4. Some Mahamudra teachers will put the teachings in a Buddha Nature context which Bhante is very wary of indeed, because depending on how you present it, Buddha Nature can come perilously close to seeming like some sort of entity. But you can do this work and use these texts without presenting things in this way. The advantage of talking in terms of Buddha Nature is that it gives you confidence. If we’re not going to use that term, we need to be clear and enable people to be confident that when they really relax, good things happen spontaneously. Buddha Nature is a more philosophical way of explaining that when mind really relaxes, positive qualities appear.
5. Bhante is also wary of people looking for advanced teachings and because Mahamudra can be a way of talking about the highest experience or realisation, sometimes Bhante has felt that there were people practicing from the Mahamudra or Dzogchen tradition and putting on airs because this is the highest teaching, where actually the level at which they’re practising is nowhere near that.

The Mahamudra tradition itself doesn't put on airs, or use lots of high-sounding terms with lots of capital letters. For example, ‘realisation’- realisation is referred to in Mahamudra as ‘ordinary mind’ – when you really allow mind to relax and it isn’t constructing a sense of me, mind is just very ordinary. That’s part of our objection to it, because as human beings we want to be special, but when the mind is open, and the body is relaxed, there's really nothing special about it. It’s the same for all of us. It’s that being special that we can't let go of. It seems as if we would rather suffer and be special than have a relaxed open mind and be nothing special.

Some of the advantages of this approach, certainly for Order members and other people with interest and capacity to make use of it are:

1. This approach does introduce a strong emphasis on relaxation, being in the present, and not grasping after results. Relaxation is helpful at all levels, especially as the tendency for leaning into the future, and the tension associated with that, is now so prevalent in our society. Just practising to relax the gaze and take some of the tension out is important.
2. This is a tradition which has been very focused on meditation for a long time, around 1,000 years, and out of all of that practice there are a lot of very practical instructions which have been handed down, many orally but some written. Therefore, there is a lot in this tradition which can be a real aid to those of us who are trying to establish a deeper meditative tradition within Triratna. Although we need to keep forging our own path, we don't have to reinvent the wheel in terms of what works with meditation and being on retreat - there's a lot of experience we can learn from.
3. For those interested in insight work, it can open up new horizons, new ways to explore and new ways in. For example, we have the Order Insight Inquiry, which is great and really having a very positive effect on the Order. That is mainly an exploration of *anatta* – or of the three marks if you do it that way - so when you come to the end of that, and there are ‘no more questions’, where do you go from there? There is the possibility of exploring desire and ill will, and there is now a stream of order members who are going there and beyond. This tradition gives us other possible areas to explore and other questions to ask to illuminate aspects of our experience.

Another possible answer to the question of "where do I go from here?" when we've done some work on no-self, is "keep looking" - keep checking whatever we've discovered, because there is always that tendency to stop looking afresh at what we've discovered and for the old way of seeing things to sneak back. Sometimes new questions can help us keep unravelling, because we've seen certain things but there are other aspects which are unquestioned about our experience and about how we are approaching the world, which the angle we came in at and the question we asked still left standing. Sometimes another set of questions or way of looking at things will take out another set of concepts that we hadn't quite realised were there, which enables more to unravel. Another part of deepening our insight tradition in Triratna is getting some sense of how and why it is that these traditions structure the questioning in the way that they do. In doing that we’re taking the Yogacara and Madhyamaka and seeing directly what they’re talking about. This way of looking at the nature of mind may be an appealing way to explore for some people.

1. Mahamudra practice is also helpful at a point in your practice where that self who is striving for enlightenment is starting to get in the way. This approach is designed to deal with that aspect of the path.

So, there are various possible advantages for us. Mahamudra is often seen as mainly Just Sitting, but it also contains a lot of structured practice. It's about getting a balance; if we have a very busy life and on top of that all we do is structured practice, then our mind can end up feeling very squeezed. It can get tired of structure. This also gives us a way in to big, open space and very relaxed practice, which is a real antidote.

With many thanks to Karunagita,

Vessantara

1. *The Ocean of True Meaning* OTM] Quote from the beginning of **Essential Points for the Mind** in the Shamatha Section, Lesson 22. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. OTM, Beginning of Lesson 24. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. OTM, beginning of Lesson 40. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Mahamudra – The Ocean of True Meaning by Karmapa Wangchug Dorje, translated by Henrik Havlat. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. OTM, Lesson 23. The quote is from Dagpo Rinpoche (Gampopa), ‘expressing an insight of Dombhi Heruka’. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)