TOWARD AN UNDERSTANDING OF NON-DUAL MINDFULNESS

John Dunne

The aim of this article is to explore an approach to 'mindfulness' that lies outside of the usual Buddhist mainstream. This approach adopts a 'non-dual' stance to meditation practice, and based on my limited experience and training in Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction, this non-dual notion of 'mindfulness' seems an especially appropriate point of comparison between Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction and Buddhism. That comparison itself will not be the focus here—given my own inexpertise and lack of clinical experience, it would be best to leave the comparison to others! Instead, the aim here will be to explore some features of 'mindfulness' in the context of non-dual styles of Buddhist practice. To begin, we will assess some difficulties that emerge when one attempts to speak of 'mindfulness' in Buddhism. Next, we will turn to the somewhat radical notion of 'non-dual' practice in relation to the more mainstream descriptions found in the Buddhist Abhidharma literature. We will then examine some crucial features of Buddhist non-dualism, including attitudes and theories about thoughts and judgments. A brief foray into specific practice instructions will help us to understand the role of 'mindfulness' in a specific non-dual tradition called, 'Mahāmudrā' (the 'Great Seal'). Finally, after some reflection on 'mindfulness' in the non-dual practice of Mahāmudrā, I will conclude by considering a crucial issue: the context of practice.

This mind itself, bound by its knots—if one lets go, There is no doubt: it will be free. (Saraha)

1. Authority and the problem of one Buddhism

As other authors here have affirmed, the Buddhist tradition is not monolithic: Buddhism exhibits great diversity in its philosophies, meditation techniques, institutional structures, political roles, cultural expressions and numerous other features. Some scholars have even suggested that, in contemporary academic contexts, it is highly misleading to use the single term 'Buddhism' to describe these diverse manifestations in cultures as divergent as India, Sri Lanka, Vietnam, Nepal, Tibet, Korea, China, Japan, North America and so on. The well substantiated claim

here is that any attempt to speak in the singular of 'Buddhism' necessarily obscures actual diversity in philosophy and practice by masking it with our own, particular notion of what 'Buddhism' in the singular might be. Clearly, if we are to avoid simply projecting our own assumptions and desires, we must explore the diversity of Buddhisms and see how some strands might object to the understanding of 'mindfulness' in Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), while other strands might endorse it readily.[1]

In moving beyond a monolithic notion of a singular Buddhism, however, we face two difficult challenges that emerge from Buddhist traditions themselves. One is simply the problem of finding the right term(s) to interpret as 'mindfulness.' The same problem of diversity applies here, except that even within single strands of Buddhism, conflicting opinions appear. Let us mark this problem by dropping the awkward quotation marks and capitalizing Mindfulness so as to remind ourselves that this singular term can easily mask great diversity within Buddhism and in contemporary usage.

Setting aside for the moment the problem of Mindfulness's diversity, we encounter another, perhaps more difficult issue: the various Buddhist traditions and teachers themselves often insist that, in the final analysis, Buddhism is indeed singular and monolithic. This does not necessarily mean that a tradition or teacher will claim that the one true Buddhism is the one found in that tradition's philosophy and practice. Certainly, such claims are made, but another approach is to demonstrate that one's tradition fits into an overarching, unitary vision of Buddhism, and to do so, one must reconcile the current features of one's tradition with earlier practices and texts that, at least on the surface, may appear to be quite different from one's tradition. This approach appears especially in Buddhist commentarial literature—precisely the texts that one would consult for a detailed analysis of Mindfulness. Each Buddhist tradition takes a set of older texts as in some way authoritative, and even if these texts appear to contradict the practice or philosophy of one's tradition, a skilful commentator can find a way to reconcile these older materials with the contemporary tradition.

When commentators reconcile their own traditions with earlier materials, they implicitly (or sometimes, explicitly) argue for the overall unity of Buddhism. But the unity of Buddhism is not what is actually at stake. Instead, if commentators cannot connect their particular tradition to earlier, authoritative texts written by great, authoritative figures, then that tradition's followers and its critics may all doubt whether the tradition itself is authoritative. In other words, the drive toward One Buddhism in traditional scholarship is largely driven by the need to justify the authenticity of the commentator's tradition. This problem becomes especially acute when a tradition develops new practices and philosophical perspectives. Critics (especially those in competing Buddhist traditions) can claim that these new practices and philosophies are inauthentic, and followers may develop similar doubts that will block the effectiveness of practice techniques. For these reasons, Buddhist traditions usually resist any claim to novelty: in some sense, each tradition claims that it embodies just what the Buddha taught (even if it was taught only implicitly).[2]

In India and Tibet, the need to justify the authenticity of one's tradition required Buddhists to demonstrate how their traditions connected to a number of older Buddhist texts of various kinds, but for our purposes, the most important body of texts is the *Abhidharma*. For later Mahāyāna thinkers in India and Tibet, two texts in particular were touchstones: the *Abhidharmakośa* of Vasubandhu and the *Abhidharmasamuccaya* of Asaṅga. These texts themselves harkened back to earlier materials, and in the end, they are generally understood to be rooted in the 'speech of the Buddha' *(buddhavacana)* itself. These *Abhidharma* texts are especially relevant here because in them we find technical discussions of meditative practices and terminology, including notions of Mindfulness. Thus, if later Mahāyāna Buddhists in India and Tibet wrote about their meditation theories and practices, they were obliged to demonstrate that it was possible to use these *Abhidharma* theories, terms and categories to explicate their traditions' practices. It is crucial to note, however, that the theories, terms and categories in these *Abhidharma* texts were formulated no later than the fourth century (C.E.), and none of their major theories, terms or categories has been revised since. This would pose no problem if theories and practices of meditation in later India and Tibet remained completely static, or at least did not change in a way that is difficult to reconcile with the *Abhidharma*. But theory and practice did indeed change in that way. In particular, and of special relevance here, is the emergence of styles of practice that are best called 'non-dual,' especially the one we will consider below: Mahāmudrā.[3]

2. The non-dual and the *Abhidharma*

Notions of non-duality (Skt., *advaya*) occur early in Indian Buddhism. Certainly, the ultimate non-duality of *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa* is one example that is critical to the emergence of Mahāyāna Buddhism around the first century (C.E.). In speaking of Mahāmudrā as a non-dual style of practice, however, I am referring specifically to a form of non-duality that finds its first expression no earlier than the third century (C.E.), and that undergoes further development around the seventh century. This form of non-duality is concerned specifically with the duality of knowing subject vs. known object *(grāhyagrāhakadvaya)*. From an historical perspective, two developments within Indian Buddhism allow this style of practice to develop. First, Yogācāra philosophy (starting around the second or third century) maintains that ignorance *(avidyā)* occurs in its subtlest form as the seemingly real appearance of an ultimately false distinction between object and subject in experience. In other words, for Yogācāra thought, ignorance in its subtlest form manifests as the sense that there is a subjectivity that stands distinct and separate from the objects it apprehends. Since one central goal of all Mahāyāna practice is to eliminate ignorance by experiencing reality as it truly is *(yathābhūtadarśana)*, for Yogācāra thinkers a truly liberative meditative state must not be caught in the false distinction between subject and object. In other words, the state must be *non-dual*, in that the experience is not structured by the duality of object and subject. It is, instead, 'non-dual wisdom' *(Skt., advayajñāna).*

For practitioners to experience a non-dual state, however, there must be some form of knowing or experiencing that is not structured by subject–object duality. This form of knowing is 'reflexive awareness' (Skt. *svasaṃvitti,* Tib., *rang rig*), and it does not receive a robust theoretical treatment until the works of Dharmakīrti and his major commentators (seventh to ninth centuries). Once a clear account of reflexive awareness is in place, Buddhist authors now have the tools to speak of truly non-dual meditative states, namely, those in which the meditator experiences consciousness in its true form as utterly devoid of subject–object structuring. And this is precisely the type of practice that emerges historically as Mahāmudrā in India by the end of the first millennium (C.E.).[4]

Below, we will examine some features of Mahāmudrā theory and practice, especially in terms of Mindfulness, but let us first point to an immediate problem that Mahāyāna commentators face when they wish to speak of Mahāmudrā in technical terms. The technical tools and vocabulary that they use must be drawn from the *Abhidharma* works mentioned above, since these are taken to be the authoritative sources for such purposes. But according to those works, *all* liberative meditative states necessarily have an object; that is, any meditation that a Buddhist would use to eliminate ignorance would have to be structured by subject–object duality. Simply put, the *Abhidharmasamuccaya* or *Abhidharma-kośa* do not articulate any theory about a meditative state that eliminates ignorance and is devoid of subject–object duality. Indeed, except for some unusual cases that are not considered useful on the path, the *Abhidharma* as a whole assumes that a state that one would cultivate on the path is necessarily a state that is oriented toward some object that one meditates upon.

Clearly, it is not easy to formulate an *Abhidharma* account of 'non-dual wisdom'—a form of knowing that is radically unstructured by object and subject. And since the *Abhidharma* account of Mindfulness likewise assumes that meditative states are structured by subject–object duality, it seems obvious that we should not attempt to map *Abhidharma* categories directly onto non-dual practices such as Mahāmudrā. Indeed, it seems highly problematic to use any Buddhist sources prior to the seventh century (C.E.) to explicate the cognitive details of non-dual practices, inasmuch as these sources lack the theoretical tools and terminology to address non-dual meditations, including their features such as non-dual Mindfulness.

One can object, however, that members of the non-dual Mahāmudrā tradition in Tibet certainly did use *Abhidharma* categories and terminology just for this purpose. In other words, as the Mahāmudrā tradition moved from India to Tibet, it also developed in ways that led to more systematic explications of the practice, and while many new terms were coined or adopted, much of the *Abhidharma*'s technical vocabulary was also adapted (in ways that are sometimes quite confusing) for the purpose of analysing Mahāmudrā practice. For example, the *Abhidharma* term *śamatha* (Tib., *zhi gnas*) occurs frequently in later Tibetan accounts of Mahāmudrā, even though the *Abhidharma* use of the term always assumes that there is an object of meditation, whereas in Mahāmudrā *śamatha* is clearly set in a context where the goal is to move beyond focus on an object.

Why do later Tibetan scholars of Mahāmudrā employ *Abhidharma* terminology, even though the fit is at times quite loose? One reason may simply be that *Abhidharma* terms were the best available ones, and without engaging in some laborious update of the entire *Abhidharma*, it was best to adapt and update a few select terms that were especially useful for understanding Mahāmudrā practice. Another reason, one coming from a contemporary academic perspective, is that to maintain the authenticity of Mahāmudrā practices, Tibetan commentators *had to* connect those practices with the *Abhidharma*. If the practice could not be explicated in *Abhidharma* terms, it was not authentic. Thus, no matter how difficult the fit might be at times, there was no choice but to use *Abhidharma* terms to explain Mahāmudrā, at least in certain contexts.[5]

In the contemporary context, it certainly remains legitimate to employ *Abhidharma* tools to understand practices that emerge long after the *Abhidharma*, but it is probably important to ask some questions. If we are examining a non-dual style of practice, have we updated the *Abhidharma* terms so that they fit better? And if we are examining a non-dual style, why not examine non-dual texts themselves, rather than the *Abhidharma*? Is our motivation to use the *Abhidharma* as a means to argue about authenticity and authority? In other words, in the face of the obvious diversity within Buddhism, do we prefer to argue for one authentic version of Mindfulness? If so, then why?

3. Key features of non-dual styles of practice

By now it is perhaps obvious that, in comparing Mindfulness in MBSR to Buddhist practice, I do not see the *Abhidharma* itself as providing the best tools. Based on my experience in MBSR training, my research on the topic, and my many conversations with MBSR practitioners, it seems clear to me that MBSR is overall adopting a non-dual approach to practice.[6] The appropriate point of comparison must be found within non-dual Buddhist traditions, and with that in mind, I will now turn to some relevant key features of non-dual practice styles.

These features connect to an overall concern that fundamentally distinguishes non-dual Buddhist traditions from other approaches: to put it simply, what is the continuity between an ordinary mind and the mind of a Buddha? In other words, to what extent are the qualities of buddhahood or awakening *(bodhi)* present in an ordinary person? In answering this crucial question, Buddhist traditions fall along a spectrum. At one end of the spectrum, *all* the qualities of awakening are already present in an ordinary person's mind; at the other end of the spectrum, only some very minimal qualities are present, just enough to make it possible for an ordinary person to develop the other qualities. Each of these options has its philosophical and practical challenges. If one maintains that all the qualities of awakening are already innate in any sentient being's mind, it would seem that we all should already be buddhas. The answer is that, yes, in a sense we are essentially already awakened, but our minds are occluded by other features that prevent our natural buddhahood from manifesting

spontaneously. For the other position, those who say that the qualities of buddhahood must be acquired or constructed, the problem is explaining how we can even begin, if we are cluelessly mired in our ignorance. Here, the answer is that, given the cognitive qualities we do have, the proper training and instruction can move us beyond that ignorant state, if we apply sufficient effort.

The two endpoints of this spectrum are often referred to as 'Sudden' (Tib., *cig car ba*) and 'Gradual' (Tib., *rim bzhin pa*) approaches to Buddhahood, but since these terms can be confusing, I will refer to these endpoints as 'Innateism' and 'Constructivism.' For the Innateist, progress along the path mostly involves eliminating the obscurations that prevent our innate buddhahood from emerging. For the Constructivist, the path involves eliminating obstructions, but it also requires carefully acquiring or constructing the qualities that eventually result in buddhahood. Again, it is important to see that these two positions fall at the ends of a spectrum, and various Buddhist traditions can be located at one or another point along that scale. And here is the crucial point: non-dual approaches always tend toward the Innateist approach, while the classical *Abhidharma* perspective is far more Constructivist.[7]

For the non-dual Innateist, a central task is to eliminate the obstructions that mask one's innate Buddhahood, but here the obvious question is: just what are these obstructions? As Buddhism historically develops increasingly sophisticated accounts of experience, this question raises the possibility that many qualities of ordinary experience itself are obscuring Buddhahood. For a host of reasons that cannot be explained here, the Mahāmudrā adepts of India generally took a fairly radical Innateist stance: they conclude that most or even *all* the structures of ordinary cognition are part of the problem. In other words, the ordinary structures of cognition—including time, space, identity and many others—are the main obstacle to the spontaneous emergence of one's innate Buddhahood. These structures, subsumed under the Sanskrit term *prapañca* (Tib., *spros pa*), are the subtlest manifestation of ignorance, and the goal of both philosophy and meditation practice must be to eliminate them.

Buddhist Constructivists, on the other hand, maintain that it is more the content of these structures, rather than the structures themselves, that are the problem. Certainly, some of the structures of one's ordinary cognition must change, but most of the basic structures such as time, space, and subject–object orientation are not taken to be problematic in themselves. Indeed, they are essential to progress along the path because without them, one cannot create one's own future Buddhahood, which must be constructed piece by piece over time. For the Constructivists, it is more some specific content, such as an automatic belief in one's own fixed identity, that must be eliminated, and other qualities, such as compassion, that must be cultivated. This process of elimination and cultivation (or construction) leads to Buddhahood for the Constructivist.

It is important to recall that the majority of Indian Buddhist scholars would be placed somewhere on the Constructivist end of this spectrum, and when the Innateist position arises, it does so in response to Constructivism. In part this

means that the Innateist approach in India was *contrarian*: it stood outside the Buddhist mainstream and critiqued it. Thus, Saraha (fl. c. 975?), one of the great Innateist authors of India, even mocks the mainstream, scholastic approach with its highly technical accounts of meditation. And Maitripa (fl. c. 1035?), who was more willing to use some of the mainstream philosophical tools, nevertheless argues radically that proper meditation involves *asmṛti* ('non-mindfulness') and *amanasikāra* ('non-attention').[8]

In speaking of 'non-mindfulness' and 'non-attention,' Maitripa directly invokes the *Abhidharma* account of meditation, whereby *smṛti* ('mindfulness') and *manasikāra* ('attention') are considered essential to proper meditation practice. In the classical *Abhidharma* account, these two facets of awareness must be present in order for an object to be held with stability in a meditative state. And it is precisely for this reason that Maitripa insists that in proper *non-dual* meditation, these two facets must be inverted or negated. From the non-dual Innateist perspective, if one is cultivating *smṛti* (Pāli, *sati*) and *manasikāra,* then one is cultivating ignorance because one is only strengthening the subject–object structures of awareness— the very structures that are the subtlest manifestation of ignorance itself.

Below we will examine some specific practice instructions that emerge much later from this radical inversion of the Buddhist mainstream, but let us first explore some further implications of the non-dual Innateist approach. Maitripa's coinage of 'non-mindfulness' and 'non-attention' already point to a central theme: whatever techniques are employed in meditation, they must be aimed at eliminating *prapañca,* the structures of ordinary cognition that occlude one's innate Buddhahood. At the more advanced levels of practice, contemplative practice targets the structures that involve 'dualistic cognition' (Tib., *gnyis 'dzin gyi blo*), but since those structures are understood to be quite subtle, beginners (and even fairly advanced practitioners) cannot aim to allow them to dissipate from the start. Instead, grosser structures that depend on dualistic cognition are the starting point of practice, and these include especially the structures that permit judgments (discursive thoughts) to arise.

To understand the nature of thoughts and judgments in this context, it is useful to turn to the Buddhist epistemological tradition descending from Dharmakīrti (fl. seventh century C.E.) and his commentators, since their works seem to be an important source for the Innateist styles of practice that eventually arise in India.[9] Their theories point to three features of thoughts and judgments that are especially relevant to a novice's practice. The first is that judgments involve what cognitive scientists call 'time travelling,' that is, the projection of oneself as the thinking subject into the past or the future. According to the relevant Buddhist theory of concept formation, all concepts necessarily involve this feature. Hence, to eliminate entrapment in the structures of thoughts or judgments, an obvious starting place is to cultivate present-centred awareness, as will be evident from the practice instructions below.

There is a second key feature of the Buddhist theory about thoughts: even though judgments or discursive thoughts are only representations and not real in

themselves, they nevertheless present themselves as real. In other words, the thought of an 'apple' is not an actual apple; it cannot be eaten. Nevertheless, we have an innate tendency to construe our thoughts as real. Thus, in a way that is similar to the notion of 'cognitive fusion' in Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, we 'fuse' or meld our representations of reality with reality itself.[10] As a result of seeming to be real in this way, thoughts often seem highly relevant to one, and they thus draw one into a whole series of thoughts. In practice, then, one cultivates the capacity to break this cognitive fusion and not become caught in a chain of thoughts.

A third key aspect of this Buddhist view of judgments or thoughts is that they necessarily involve 'cognitive effort' *(ābhoga,* Tib., *rtsol ba).*[11] Further research on this notion in the Buddhist epistemological tradition is necessary, but it clearly rests on some kind of distinction between perception as a more receptive process and thought or judgment as a more active, constructive process. This does not mean that thoughts or judgments arise only when one makes a conscious effort, but rather that the process of forming thoughts requires additional, mental conditions beyond those which are necessary for sheer perception. The formation of thoughts or judgment could thus be well below one's usual level of awareness, but it is nevertheless driven by factors such as interest, goal-orientation, desires and dislikes, and so on. All these together constitute a kind of 'cognitive effort,' and this seems to be one factor in the emphasis on 'effortlessness' as a means to release the structures that allow thoughts to arise. This may explain why one of the major themes of Innateist practice such as Mahāmudrā is the 'letting go' (Tib., *lhod kyis glod)* of thinking itself.

Finally, building on these three features of judgments or thoughts, the Mahāmudrā practice texts suggest another important aspect: the more value-laden the thought, the more likely it is to have strong 'cognitive fusion' and thus pull one into a chain of thoughts. The implicit theory here seems to be that thoughts seem especially relevant to oneself when they are highly charged or value-laden—this includes thoughts about the good and the bad, the ethical and the unethical, the pleasant and the unpleasant, and so on. As a result of seeming to have great relevance, these thoughts ensnare us all the more easily. Hence, the practice instructions discussed below will show that an additional feature of practice, especially for the beginner, is not to become caught in value judgments during meditation, including especially judgments about the meditation itself.

In the next section we will briefly examine some actual practice instructions that illustrate the points made above, but first, let us note some problems with applying an *Abhidharma* analysis to non-dual Mahāmudrā practice. Given the features discussed above, it should already be clear that non-dual Mindfulness must eventually move beyond ethical judgment, recollection of the past (including recalling one's vows), or prospection (thoughts about the future). However, as Georges Dreyfus points out in his article elsewhere in this issue (Dreyfus, 2011), ethical judgment, recollection and prospection are crucial to the *Abhidharma* model of Mindfulness. Dreyfus correctly notes, for example, that the interpretation of Mindfulness as 'present-centred nonevaluative awareness is

problematic, for it reflects only some of the ways in which these original terms are deployed.' He points to the interpretation of *sati* (Skt., *smṛti*) as Mindfulness, and remarks that it must 'distinguish wholesome from unwholesome mental states.' Thus, Mindfulness 'must be explicitly cognitive and evaluative.' This means that Mindfulness involves 'retention of information' and also prospection with regard to future spiritual goals. In short, based on his reading of the *Abhidharma* approach, he rejects the interpretation of Mindfulness as primarily being 'present-centred non-judgmental awareness.' Indeed, for the Constructivist approach of the *Abhidharma*, an emphasis on present-centred, non-judgmental awareness would seem to lose the moral or ethical framework of Buddhist practice. At the end of this article, I will return to the way that non-dual Innateist traditions respond to this issue.

In any case, Dreyfus's analysis is an excellent presentation of a 'classical' *Abhidharma* approach to Mindfulness, but it may not be a good fit for the non-dual Innateist approaches to Mindfulness. The features discussed above already indicate the importance of allowing the mind to settle in a non-judgmental, present-centred state, and it likewise indicates how non-dual traditions, striking a stance deliberately contrary to *Abhidharma* scholasticism, remain highly skeptical about the utility of evaluative thought in practice. Instead, one must become released from the very structures of such thoughts, since they are a manifestation of ignorance itself. All this will become more salient when we explore some instructions for Mahāmudrā practice and examine the role of Mindfulness therein.

4. Examples from practice instructions

Let us turn briefly now to some instructions from a well known meditation manual in the Mahāmudrā tradition, the *Ocean of Definitive Meaning* by Karma Wangchûg Dorjé, the ninth Karmapa (1556–1603). The text, composed by a central figure in the Tibetan Mahāmudrā lineages, is one of the most complete compendia of practice instructions available. Along with another, more polemical compendium by Dakpo Tashi Namgyel (1512–1587),[12] the *Ocean* often serves as a reference not only for practice instructions, but also for the sequence of training in Mahāmudrā practice. Innateist traditions such as the Mahāmudrā often avoid systematic presentations, in part because they do not adequately account for the need to adjust practices to suit the propensities and capacities of particular individuals. Certainly, the early Indian Mahāmudrā adepts completely eschewed any attempt to give a systematic account of their practice. Karma Wangchûg Dorjé explicitly recognizes the importance of individualization, and he too seems suspicious of systematization. But perhaps moved by a need to clarify or preserve lesser known elements of his lineage, he carefully lays out the sequence of practice through a wide range of techniques based on numerous sources, including the oral lineage. His text thus becomes a remarkable source not only for a relatively systematic version of practical instructions, but also for an historical inquiry into a broad range of Mahāmudrā practice. At the same time, in comparison to Dakpo

Tashi Namgyel, Karma Wangchûg Dorjé is much less intent on responding to critics of Mahāmudrā by harmonizing it with more Constructivist approaches; instead, he focuses on practical instructions.

Ocean is divided into short segments that address a particular stage of practice, and for present purposes, the most relevant sections concern the general instructions that a beginner would receive at the outset of formal meditation practice. This point in the practice has already been preceded by important preliminaries, which set the type of context that will be discussed at the end of this article. With those preliminaries in place, the beginner will now start to develop the mental stability necessary for Mahāmudrā, and the term used to refer to this stage of training is *śamatha* ('Calm Abiding'), a term that distinguishes this phase from the next, when *vipaśyanā* ('Insight') arises. It is with the arisal of *vipaśyanā* that one gains liberative insight into the nature of reality itself.

Before turning to the actual instructions, the meaning of *śamatha* and *vipaśyanā* as phases of meditation training must be clarified. These terms are drawn from the *Abhidharma*, and in that context they are understood to be strictly structured by subject–object duality. In Mahāmudrā training, however, one eventually must move beyond such structures, and even the earliest methods of training proceed quickly from a focus on a visual object, to focus on the breath, and on to a state without explicit focus. Thus, it would be a mistake to construe *śamatha* in the Mahāmudrā tradition as simply equivalent to the cultivation of mental stability on an object, as it is understood in *Abhidharma* contexts.

What then, at the very outset of formal practice, does Karma Wangchûg Dorjé recommend for the beginner? The initial, overall instructions are simple (*Ocean* 78):

> Do not pursue the past. Do not usher in the future. Rest evenly within present awareness, clear and nonconceptual.

These general instructions, while remarkably simple, are difficult to follow because they require that the beginner not be caught by the features of thought noted above. First, one does not 'pursue' *(rjes bcad)* the past nor 'usher in' *(sngun bsu)* or anticipate the future. As Karma Wangchûg Dorjé notes, 'The past has ceased and ended; it is gone. Hence, there is nothing to think about. And the future has not yet come; it is not real, nor can it exist as an object.' When thoughts arise, they necessarily involve both 'time travelling' and the sense that the thought itself is somehow 'fused' with some real thing that it allegedly represents. The simple instruction here is to realize that thoughts about past and future cannot be about real things because neither the past nor the future truly exist except in our thoughts. This breaks the fusion and allows one to drop the time-travelling thoughts so as to 'rest within present awareness.' Thoughts about the present can arise also, however, and so Karma Wangchûg Dorjé adds that even these thoughts are caught up in fusion, which he refers to as 'cognitive grasping' *(mtshan 'dzin)*. Again showing that thoughts cannot actually be what they seem to represent, he adds that one must drop all notions of 'is' or 'is not'; 'existent' or 'non-existent'; 'good' or 'bad'; and so on. He notes that 'interrupting the stream of thoughts

about the three times [i.e., past, present and future]' is essential for the beginner to advance in practice (*Ocean* 78).

Much more could be said here, and Karma Wangchûg Dorjé unpacks these general instructions at length. The gist, however, remains the same, even up to the most advanced levels of practice: drop thoughts of past, present and future and release the mind into its natural state of clear, non-conceptual awareness. These core instructions hearken back to some famed advice from the Indian Mahāmudrā master, Tilopa (988–1069). Karma Wangchûg Dorjé repeats that advice (*Ocean* 83):

> Not pondering.
> Not thinking.
> Not wondering.
> Not meditating.
> Not analyzing.
> Just place the mind in its natural state.

Citing the great Tibetan adept Ogyenpa (1230–1309), Karma Wangchûg Dorjé interprets the first three lines as referring to past, present and future, and this echoes the instructions given just above. But one is further advised that one should not strive to 'meditate' by becoming absorbed in some blank thoughtless absorption in nothingness. Nor should one 'analyze' what is arising, since this too will perpetuate the structures of cognitive grasping. Both of these—'meditating' and 'analyzing' relate to the role that 'cognitive effort' plays in producing thought. Releasing that effort, one is advised again to simply release the mind into clear, non-conceptual awareness, which is its natural state.

Tilopa's famed advice is only one passage from a long section in which Karma Wangchûg Dorjé uses various citations, stories and analogies that again and again return to the basic theme of his original instructions. My aim here is not to convey these instructions—a task that I am not qualified to do. Instead, I aim to show that they clearly target the features of thought that ensnare the beginner: time travelling, cognitive fusion and cognitive effort. In addition, Karma Wangchûg Dorjé also writes passages that underscore the Mahāmudrā tradition's additional insight into the way thoughts ensnare the mind: they seem especially relevant to oneself, and with a sense of urgency, they carry us away in a chain of judgments, evaluations, hopes and fears. He tells a somewhat amusing story to highlight the role of anticipation and evaluation (*Ocean* 84–5):

> For example, suppose a man comes to a place and is told, 'The official says not to send you anywhere else, so stay here today.' So, even though he came with an interest in staying there, the situation gets him to thinking, 'He is going to order me to do all kinds of hard work—what else could this be about? Maybe it would be better to steer clear of all this.' And thus he gets to the point of running away. But if the official had not said anything, the man could easily have stayed for however long he was to stay. Therefore, don't give the mind work. Instead, relax and release it, do not meditate on anything. Relaxed, free and easy, release the

mind into mere non-distraction. Within a state free of hopes and fears, devoid of evaluation or judgment, be carefree and open. And within that state, do not purse the past; do not usher in the future; place [awareness] within the present, without adjustment, without hopes or fears. Cutting all conceptual structures about the external, do not allow phenomenal appearances to surge outward. You might think, 'Meditation has arisen! Great!' or 'It has not arisen. What a shame.' But even if just that much happens, it causes the profusion of thoughts, so within a state free of anything to meditate upon or any action of meditation, clearly and directly release the mind. And thus, from that point forward, the mind naturally abides [with stability]. As Saraha said, 'If one lets go of this very mind, bound by its knots, there is no doubt: it will be free.' So without contrivance or adjustment, one releases it, having cut the structures of the three times [past, present and future]. This is the best way to seek mental stability.

This passage covers all the elements discussed above: time travelling, fusion, and cognitive effort. But it also notes the role that expectation and evaluation play in distracting one from actual practice. Here too we see the additional instruction, one repeated many times, that one need not 'adjust' or 'contrive' *(bcos)* the state. Attempts to tinker with the mind in this way reflect not only the disturbance of cognitive effort, but they are also motivated by evaluations and judgments about what meditation is supposed to be. For the practitioner, notions about 'what meditation should be' present themselves with special relevance. After all, if one is fully committed to meditation practice, what could be of more importance than proper meditation? Since such thoughts seem so important and relevant to practice, they easily ensnare the practitioner. Hence, even these evaluations and judgments about 'meditation' itself must be suspended if one is to release the mind into its natural state, unadjusted and uncontrived.

Overall, the gist of these instructions is unambiguous and indisputably clear, and as with the instructions cited earlier, they strongly suggest that, at least when engaged in actual practice or *mnyam bzhag*, even the beginner should not be recollecting anything explicit, nor somehow retaining awareness of spiritual goals or 'hopes and fears' (Tib., *re dogs*). Instead, without evaluation, one should simply release attempts at 'meditating' and instead rest in present-centred awareness. In light of these instructions, it seems difficult to construe Mindfulness in the non-dual, Mahāmudrā context as being 'explicitly cognitive and evaluative' or 'retaining information,' to cite again Dreyfus's account of the *Abhidharma* model (Dreyfus, 2011). Such attitudes seem quite contrary to the above instructions. Instead, something like 'present-centred non-judgmental awareness' would seem to be a better fit. Is this, then, Mindfulness?

5. Non-dual Mindfulness?

What is non-dual Mindfulness? This is not an easy question, and I would not dare to attempt a complete answer. Not only is my own research still ongoing, but

the Mahāmudrā authors themselves disagree on how best to construe Mindfulness. We can appreciate the difficulties they face when we consider this apparent paradox: to properly practice Mahāmudrā, even as a beginner, it would seem that one must remain within the present without evaluation or judgment, yet clearly, to do so requires that one recollect the instructions: 'Do not pursue the past. Do not usher in the future. Rest evenly within present awareness, clear and nonconceptual.' Not only must one remember these instructions, but to implement them, surely one must evaluate one's present state to confirm that the instructions have been followed. And the tradition would not disagree: meditation here (which, in the end is 'non-meditation') is not a matter of simply entering a blank, unconscious state, nor is it a matter of randomly suppressing thoughts. There is a targeted outcome, which is the cultivation of an objectless, reflexive awareness of the mind's true nature. To this end, the instructions are to be followed, and for authors such as Karma Wangchûg Dorjé, there is a clear distinction between proper and improper practice.

These issues point to the need for some kind of monitoring—a capacity to examine one's practice as it is occurring, especially for the beginner. And this monitoring connects to one aspect of Mindfulness for Karma Wangchûg Dorjé. Although the contemporary concept of Mindfulness may well extend beyond any single Buddhist term, it clearly must involve *dran pa* in Tibetan (Skt, *smṛti;* Pāli, *sati*). Employing this term, Karma Wangchûg Dorjé speaks of a kind of monitoring as the 'Spy of Mindfulness' *(dran pa'i so pa)*. He mentions the 'Spy' at several points connected especially to the early phases of practice. At one such phase, for example, one turns to focusing on the breath as an object, following the principle that 'In dependence on [practicing with] a focal object, the objectless [practice] emerges' (94; *dmigs pa la ni brten nas su / mi dmigs pa nyid rab tu skye*). As is common with beginners, a deluge of thoughts may flow when one attempts to focus in this way, and Karma Wangchûg Dorjé recommends that one not attempt to suppress the thoughts, but that one can nevertheless remain aware 'like someone threading a needle.' He notes (*Ocean* 95):

> In such contexts, cultivate the motivating notion ('*phen pa'i 'du shes*), 'I will apprehend the mind.' Then, during the actual session, set up the Spy of Mindfulness*(dran pa,* Skt., *smṛti)* and carefully examine one's mental continuum, thinking, 'Is my mind stable, or not? Is it agitated or dull?' Doing so, when one sees that the mind is abiding naturally; release it without leaving that state [of natural abiding]. If it is not abiding stably, then whether there are the faults of agitation or dullness, strive to apply the specific remedies for removing each.

Here, the 'Spy' of Mindfulness is clearly a term for a kind of monitoring function that, in accounts from more Constructivist traditions, is usually referred to as 'discriminating alertness' or 'clear comprehension' (*samprajanya;* Tib., *shes bzhin*). Clearly, this Spy cannot occur when one has released the mind into its clear, non-conceptual nature because the Spy requires thought and effort. Yet, since it draws on the capacity of awareness to be aware of itself, it is appropriate to use the same

term as the Mindfulness present in the mind's natural state, namely, the 'Mindfulness of mere non-distraction' *(ma yengs tsam gyi dran pa)*.

The term 'non-distraction' is crucially important in Mahāmudrā literature, and it is even equated with meditation itself. Karma Wangchûg Dorjé himself repeatedly uses it (including in one of the passages cited earlier) to refer to the type of continual, uninterrupted awareness that, without any effort, is fully aware without any adjustment or contrivance. The Mindfulness of mere non-distraction is a feature that is always present when one successfully releases the mind into the clear, non-conceptual, natural state that is the point of even the basic instructions discussed above. One implication here is that this 'Mindfulness of mere non-distraction' is somehow essential to the natural continuity of awareness itself, and the 'Spy' is a gross, conceptual manifestation of this fundamental capacity of consciousness. Thus, the same term, 'mindfulness' *(dran pa*; Skt. *smṛti)* can be applied both to the 'Spy' and to the more fundamental capacity that is mere non-distraction. A further implication, one suited to an Innateist tradition, is that even the beginner is not cultivating a capacity that is not already present in awareness, but rather, even when invoking the 'Spy,' a practitioner is drawing on the fundamental, innate capacity of awareness to know itself that manifests in its uncontrived form as mere non-distraction.

Far more could be said here about Mindfulness, or more specifically, the use of the term *dran pa* (Skt., *smṛti)* to describe these aspects of awareness in practice. One might profitably turn to a parallel description given by Dakpo Tashi Namgyel who, in a manner similar to the rhetoric of the 'Spy' and 'mere non-distraction,' discusses the distinction between 'Effortful Mindfulness' *(rtsol bcas kyi dran pa)* and 'Effortless Mindfulness' *(rtsol med kyi dran pa),* which itself amounts to 'mere non-distraction.'[13] In any case, it would seem that effortless Mindfulness of mere non-distraction lies at the core Mahāmudrā practice. And, in comparison to more dualistic approaches drawn from the *Abhidharma*, this Mahāmudrā approach to Mindfulness seems a much better candidate for comparison with many contemporary approaches for cultivating mindfulness such as those found in MBSR.

6. Conclusion: The role of context

The question of how the non-dual Mindfulness of Mahāmudrā might relate to contemporary versions is one that I will leave to other, far more qualified authors. My hypothesis is that the comparison will be very fruitful, largely because the styles of practice and rhetoric appear to overlap in significant ways. If, however, a non-dual style of Mindfulness is indeed a much more apt point of comparison for contemporary approaches, another issue immediately surfaces: the context of practice.

In some ways, the manner I have presented the instructions on practice and Mindfulness in Mahāmudrā is misleading because even a casual glance at Karma Wangchûg Dorjé's text reveals much more. Many highly conceptual and effortful

practices are included even in the section that presents the general instructions for the formal practice aimed at 'resting in present awareness, clear and nonconceptual.' And when Karma Wangchŭg Dorjé moves on to more specific instructions for the beginner, one encounters visualizations, exhortations to consider the meaning of practice, and ethical appeals. These passages seem to move far beyond the simple cultivation of present-centred, non-evaluative awareness. In short, it is clear that even the formal practice itself is framed by a carefully developed and delivered conceptual framework of instructions. And even more important are the preliminary practices that are considered essential for the practitioner who seeks to live in the utter absence of distraction that lies at the core of Mahāmudrā practice.

What role do these preliminaries play? They establish, first, a test for the practitioner, since no one can receive formal instruction without long and intense practice of the preliminaries. They include contemplations on, for example, the inevitaly of death and the essentially dissatisfactory nature of one's confused life. They thus provide an intense motivation fuelled by the realization that one could die at any moment. And they cultivate the urge to move beyond dissatisfaction toward genuine flourishing and lasting happiness. Through the intense cultivation of devotion in the preliminaries, practitioners are made uniquely receptive to the challenging instructions of the main practice, but they are also provided with a clear spiritual goal, embodied by the living, human teacher who inspires such devotion. And through an understanding of how the present mind is karmically conditioned, practitioners encounter a context to interpret the difficulties of practice, including the anxieties, intense ecstasies and moments of depersonalization that are side effects of the practice. Clearly, these and other features of the preliminary practices require one to work with highly evaluative and complex thoughts that are themselves built on time travelling, cognitive fusion, and cognitive effort. Hence, even if evaluative judgments and value-laden thoughts are suspended in actual practice, they play a crucial role in the success of that practice.[14]

Far more could be said about the context created by the preliminaries, including especially their psychological function. But in a broader sense, this strong emphasis on preliminary practices locates the Mahāmudrā lineages squarely within the world shared by all Tibetan traditions: an ethics based in non-harm and compassion; an orientation toward the spiritual goal of eliminating all suffering; the centrality of wisdom embodied by a long lineage of realized persons—these and many more elements were shared. Yet the traditions also disagreed at times, and Mahāmudrā was certainly the target of searing critiques. In response, authors such as Dakpo Tashi Namgyel vigorously defended Mahāmudrā practice by interpreting it in classical *Abhidharma* terms. One easy explanation for his efforts is that he sought to authenticate Mahāmudrā by appealing to the unquestionable authority of the *Abhidharma*, and to a great extent, that motivation makes sense, given the social and political upheaval that threatened his Mahāmudrā tradition during his lifetime. This explanation is plausible and

relevant, but it sidesteps precisely the issue just raised: the importance of context. In India, Maitripa, Saraha, Tilopa and other influential proponents of a non-dual Innateist approach located themselves in deliberate opposition to the Buddhist mainstream. One might argue that, as long as that mainstream was present, there was little danger of losing the context of ethical values and spiritual goals that are expressed in the preliminary practices discussed above. What happens, however, when a non-dual style becomes mainstream? Perhaps Tibetan authors such as Dakpo Tashi Namgyel were not simply apologists for the non-dual approach; perhaps they were also pointing to the danger of having no mainstream against which to be contrary. In short, as Mahāmudrā practice became institutionalized in Tibet, it could no longer rely on the mainstream to provide a framework of goals, ethics, aesthetics and so on. There was no mainstream to turn to because, at least for many great monastic institutions of Tibet, Mahāmudrā had become the mainstream. In other words, the tradition could no longer rely on the mainstream to provide a context for a contrarian practice, because that contrarian practice had become an institutionalized mainstream.

With this in mind, we might ask whether contemporary mindfulness—in MBSR or in contemporary Buddhist practice—might also be emerging as its own mainstream. Certainly, it may stand in opposition to many features of mainstream culture in the United States, for example. Yet mindfulness (in the largely non-dual sense) is now widespread in the therapeutic community, and perhaps a deliberate engagement with questions of context is inevitable. Lacking clinical experience, I cannot answer this question, but perhaps it is worth posing. Or perhaps, in the spirit of the most radical non-dual approaches, all the context we need is already present, fully innate.

NOTES

1. For the issue of diversity within Buddhism, see, for example, Hallisey and Reynolds (1989) and Lopez (2005).
2. For more on this and other features of commentaries, see the introduction to Ganeri (2007).
3. Georges Dreyfus' article in this special issue of *Contemporary Buddhism* is an excellent source for the *Abhidharma* interpretation as applied to contemporary practice (Dreyfus, 2011). Others include Wallace (2006). For the *Abhidharma-samuccaya,* the translation of Rāhula's French translation (Asaṅga, 2001) is the best English source for the *Abhidharmasamuccaya*, while the translation of de la Vallée Poussin's French translation (Vasubandhu, 1990) is the only available English translation of the *Abhidharmakośa*. See also the relevant summaries in Potter (2002) for other scholarly resources.
4. In addition to 'reflexive awareness,' other English translations of *svasaṁvitti* include 'self-awareness' and 'self-knowing.' For more on Dharmakīrti, see Dreyfus (1997) and Dunne (2004).

5. An important parallel here is the role played by the works of the Indian author Candrakīrti in justifying Tibetan interpretations of Madhyamaka thought, even though his works were not easy to reconcile with many Tibetan interpretations. See Vose (2009).

6. My exposure to MBSR comes through formal training in the week-long 'MBSR in Mind-Body Medicine' and through the works of Jon Kabat-Zinn, who has also graciously clarified the notion of Mindfulness in MBSR over the course of numerous conversations and email correspondence.

7. For a scholarly treatment of the Innateist (or 'Sudden') and Constructivist (or 'Gradual') debate in the context of Tibetan Buddhism, see Ruegg (1989).

8. See Higgins (2008) and Mathes (2008) for more on the dates of these figures and the notion of *amanasikāra*. And see especially Jackson (2004, 2005) for an excellent overview of Mahāmudrā and translations from Saraha's poetic works.

9. One commentator of particular note is Śākyabuddhi (fl. Seventh to eighth centuries, C.E.), who states explicitly that the state of meditative absorption consists of the non-dual, reflexive awareness of mind itself (Dunne, 2004, 406, n.15). For more on the relevant Buddhist theories of concept formation, see Dunne (Forthcoming).

10. For 'cognitive fusion,' see chapter 3 of Hayes *et al.*, (2003).

11. See Dharmakīrti's Pramāṇavārttika (3.6), translated in Dunne (2004, 394).

12. Dakpo Tashi Namgyel's text is the famed *Phyag chen zla zer* (see references).

13. *Phyag chen zla zer* 244b-247a. Note here Dakpo Tashi Wangyel's attempts to reconcile *Abhidharma* notions of mindfulness with non-dual practice.

14. See Gyatso (1999) for the issue of the role of context in Tibetan contemplative experience.

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John Dunne, Department of Religion, Emory University, Mailstop: 1535/002/1AA 537 Kilgo Cir., Callaway S214, Atlanta, Georgia 30322, USA. Tel: + 1 404 712 9377 (office); Email: jdunne@emory.edu