Mindfulness from a Mahāyāna Perspective: Sūtric and Tantric Aspects

Martina Draszczyk
(Vienna University)

Mindfulness in the West has largely been taught and practiced through sources from the Theravāda Buddhist tradition. It is therefore worthwhile to explore an often-overlooked perspective: the practice of mindfulness in Mahāyāna traditions. These traditions have produced a substantial body of literature on mindfulness, both in the context of *sūtra*s and *tantra*s. A closer examination of these sources provides nuanced insights into the role mindfulness plays within the Mahāyāna framework. For this paper, I have confined my selection of material to a limited number of works, or rather excerpts, from Mahāyāna texts used in Indian and Tibetan Buddhism. Regarding the Tibetan works, I have focused specifically on the sources of the Dakpo Kagyupa and its teaching of *mahāmudrā*.[1]

In general, with regard to the practice of mindfulness, Mahāyāna sources emphasize the cultivation of non-reifying and non-dual states of mind to enhance a bodhisattva's training in insight and compassion. Some sūtric sources, such as *The Perfection of Wisdom in 25,000 Lines* (*Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*), bear similarities to well-known Pāli texts like the longer *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* (*The Longer Discourse on the Application of Mindfulness*). Other texts present mindfulness and in particular the fourfold application of mindfulness from the expansive perspective of a bodhisattva's training in generating the two accumulations of merit and wisdom. Notable examples include *The Teachings by Akṣayamati* (*Akṣayamatinirdeśa*) and *The Discourse on the Application of Mindfulness of the Sacred Dharma* (*Saddharmasmṛtyupasthānasūtra*). This paper aims to provide insights into the principal views and practical applications of mindfulness within Mahāyāna Buddhist practice in India and Tibet.

To understand mindfulness in the context of Buddhist practice, it is important to first situate it within the broader framework of meditation. Buddhist meditation generally encompasses training in calming abiding (Sanskrit: *śamatha*; Pāli: *samatha*) and deep insight (*vipaśyanā*;

[1] For a broader choice of material and further analysis, please see my book *The Buddha's Gift to the World: A Practitioner's Guide to the Roots of Mindfulness. An Exploration across Indian and Tibetan Traditions*. Shambala Publications. 2024.

Martina Draszczyk, "Mindfulness from a Mahāyāna Perspective: Sūtric and Tantric Aspects", *Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines*, no. 79, Octobre 2025, pp. 66-84.

vipassanā), with mindfulness (*smṛti*; *sati*) playing a pivotal and multifaceted role in this process. In fact, these practices—calming abiding and deep insight—form the core of meditative practice across all Buddhist traditions, including Mahāyāna, which incorporates both sūtric and tantric elements.

In this context, "mindfulness" refers not to the object of meditation but to the manner in which meditation is undertaken. Mindfulness is not an isolated quality; it must be accompanied by other wholesome mental factors. Asaṅga's *Compendium of the Abhidharma* (*Abhidharmasamuccaya*), a seminal text in Mahāyāna Buddhism, lists mindfulness (*smṛti*) as one of the five mental factors that determine the object of attention during moments of focused perception. The other four are intention (*chanda*), determination (*adhimokṣa*), concentration (*samādhi*), and discernment (*prajñā*). By engaging in meditation with these qualities, practitioners are able to immerse themselves deeply in the respective training in stabilizing the mind and familiarizing themselves with the nature of reality. This enables practitioners to approach the ultimate goal of Buddhist practice in Mahāyāna terms: the complete and perfect awakening of a buddha, the cessation of delusion achieved through wisdom imbued with compassion, which transcends ignorance, afflictive defilements (*kleśa*), cognitive defilements, negative karma, and the suffering it generates.

In the context of calm abiding (*śamatha*), Vasubandhu (fourth/fifth century) writes in his commentary on Maitreya/Asaṅga's *Ornament of Mahāyāna sūtras* (*Mahāyānasūtrālaṃkāra*):

> Mindfulness (*smṛti*; *sati*) and clear knowing (*samprajanya*; *sampajaññā*) stabilize the focus. Mindfulness means that the mind does not wander, while clear knowing means that the mind knows when it has wandered.[2]

This definition highlights that mindfulness is essential for maintaining focus, while clear knowing, or meta-awareness, ensures that one is aware when the mind deviates from its object of attention.

In *The Treasury of the Abhidharma* (*Abhidharmakoṣa*), Vasubandhu further elucidates the role of mindfulness in deep insight (*vipaśyanā*). He states:

> Mindfulness is insight (*prajñā*), as it results from learning, reflection, and meditation.[3]

---

[2] Draszczyk 2024, 13. See also *Sūtrālaṃkāravyākhyā*, Tibetan version in D 4026, 227a.

[3] Draszczyk 2024, 14. See also *Abhidharmakoṣa*, verse 15a, as cited in Karmapa Wangchuk Dorje 2003, 414.

Here, mindfulness is equated with insight. It sustains awareness of an object, enabling an ever-deepening understanding of its nature. Through consistent practice, mindfulness can evolve into "pure mindfulness"—a refined state that ultimately transforms into nondual wisdom (*prajñā*), no longer a conditioned mental factor. In the Mahāyāna framework, mindfulness can become one of the eighteen qualities exclusive to buddhas, signifying uninterrupted, nondual wisdom.

To further illustrate the role of mindfulness in Buddhist practice, I will draw from excerpts of *The Questions of King Milinda* (*Milindapañhā*), which dates back to the second century BCE and recounts the dialogues between King Menander I (Milinda) and the monk Nāgasena. In one passage, the King asks Nāgasena:

> "What, Nāgasena, is the characteristic mark of mindfulness?"
>
> "Noting and keeping in mind. As mindfulness springs up in the mind of the recluse, he repeatedly notes the wholesome and unwholesome, blameless and blameworthy, insignificant and important, dark and light qualities and those that resemble them … Thus does he cultivate those qualities that are desirable and shun those that should be avoided."

In this dialogue, mindfulness is portrayed as a means of discerning and cultivating the wholesome while avoiding the unwholesome.

Later, Nāgasena employs the metaphor of a "city of righteousness," where mindfulness is likened to a key element within this city:

> The city of righteousness laid out by the Blessed One … has constant mindfulness for its main street, and in that main street market-stalls are open selling flowers, perfume, fruits, antidotes, medicines, nectar, precious jewels and all kinds of merchandise. …
>
> "What is the nectar in the city of righteousness?" "Mindfulness of the body is like nectar, for all beings who are infused with this nectar of mindfulness of the body are relieved of all suffering. For this was said by the Blessed One: 'They enjoy the nectar of the deathless who practice mindfulness of the body'."[4]

In short: Mindfulness in Buddhist practice has a wide range of meanings. The following summary sets out to give an overview of the different connotations across the various Buddhist contexts. "Mindfulness" can mean:

- … recollection; memory; bringing-to-mind; not forgetting the relevant object, instructions, or events but keeping in mind, and even associating, what happened in the past with the future.

[4] Draszczyk 2024, 123–126. See Pesala 2021, 81–83. See http://www.aimwell.org/milinda.html.

- … the ethical element of knowing what is wholesome and what is unwholesome, what should be done and what should be left undone;
- … deliberately turning the attention to the immediate present-moment experience, being introspectively aware of it, noting an object and sustaining this attention. This also involves being aware of the filters that may be active in our mind such as desire, aversion, or indifference and such like.
- … relating to the present-moment experience in a wakeful, alert, relaxed, friendly, and wholesome manner, without manipulating anything. In this case, it means both being with the experience and observing the experience. This does not exclude memories and associations, as the present perception naturally involves tendencies from the past.
- … the understanding as it unfolds in the course of the practice of deep insight and can thus be quasi synonymous with discerning insight (*prajñā*). This applies in particular for the practice in the context of the fourfold "application of mindfulness."
- … balancing the mind so that it is affected by neither distraction nor agitation, neither dullness nor torpor, paving the way for other wholesome mental states to be active.
- … developing certain wholesome states of mind such as loving kindness and compassion, for example through training based on the Mettā suttas or the Tibetan Buddhist Lojong practice.

At a highly advanced level, mindfulness can also relate to a nondualistic mind:

- Embedded in wisdom and compassion, this advanced-level mindfulness is focused on just the present-moment experience, free from the entanglement of reification and thus from any conceptualizations about the experience. In this sense, in certain Mahāyāna traditions such as Chan, Zen, Mahāmudrā, and Dzogchen, it can even relate to nondualistic, direct, and nonconceptual awareness. A "nondualistic state of mind" is a formulation that is not common in Theravāda Buddhism. It is, however, part of the Mahāyāna traditions. Some Indian Buddhist masters chose in this connection to supplement the term *smṛti* with *a-smṛti*, that is, non[dual] mindfulness. Thereby they denote a state of mindfulness beyond the constraints of dualistic dichotomy. Tibetan Buddhist masters also employed the term "pure

> mindfulness"[5] to denote a quality of mindfulness that is cultivated without or almost without conceptual mental factors.

Let us now examine mindfulness in the context of the fourfold application of mindfulness (*smṛtipasthāna*; *satipaṭṭhāna*). This training is regarded as a direct path toward awakening, as it directly addresses mistaken notions (*viparyāsa*). It does so by cultivating mindfulness with regard to the body, feelings, the mind, and dharmas/dhammas/phenomena. Mistaken notions regarding matter and mind inevitably give rise to proliferations (*prapañca*), which, in turn, trigger various layers of conceptuality (*vikalpa*). These concepts—or, shall we say, the storylines that our deluded minds keep telling us—activate afflictive defilements (*kleśa*), which then lead to karmic actions and their inevitable results of suffering. Insight, capable of seeing through mistaken notions, counteracts this ongoing process. This insight enables practitioners to eventually let go of proliferations, concepts, clinging to a truly existing identity, the associated emotional and cognitive defilements, and harmful actions. In this way, suffering is brought to an end. This is precisely the purpose of the fourfold application of mindfulness. Accordingly, the Buddha is recorded to have said:

> This is the direct path for the purification of beings, for the surmounting of sorrow and lamentation, for the disappearance of *dukkha* and discontent, for acquiring the true method, for the realization of *Nibbāna*, namely, the fourfold *satipaṭṭhāna*.[6]

In *The Questions of Ratnacūḍa* (*Ratnacūḍaparipṛcchā*), a Mahāyāna *sūtra* included in the collection *The Heap of Jewels* (*Ratnakūṭa*), the Buddha explains how the fourfold application of mindfulness counters mistaken views:

> Mindfulness of the body overcomes the mistaken notion of the unattractive as attractive. Mindfulness of feelings overcomes the mistaken notion of the unpleasant as pleasant. Mindfulness of the mind overcomes the mistaken notion of the impermanent as permanent. Mindfulness of phenomena overcomes the mistaken notion of the identityless as possessing inherent identity.[7]

The manifold aspects of mindfulness practice described up to this point are foundational across virtually all Buddhist traditions.

In the Mahāyāna, the practice of mindfulness in general—and of the fourfold application of mindfulness in particular—are interwoven

---

5 Tibetan: *yang dag gi dran pa*.

6 Draszczyk 2024, 79. Translation from Pāli by Anālayo 2013, 269.

7 *Ratnacūḍaparipṛcchā*, Tibetan version H 91, vol. 40, 381b.

with the altruistic mindset of *bodhicitta*, on both the relative and the ultimate level. Bodhicitta—wisdom suffused with limitless compassion—constitutes the central vision of this path: the aspiration to attain the state of a perfectly awakened one, a buddha, for the benefit of all sentient beings, and to engage in the six perfections (*pāramitā*), such as generosity and ethical conduct, in pursuit of this aim. Rooted in this conventional *bodhicitta*, ultimate *bodhicitta*—the generation of wisdom through insight—is developed through studying, reflecting, and meditating. On this basis, tantric Mahāyāna also incorporates mindfulness in general and the fourfold application of mindfulness in particular.

Thus, a common feature of all Mahāyāna instructions on the fourfold application of mindfulness, both sūtric and tantric, is that they implement the principle of *bodhicitta* in its various perspectives. What is emphasized is mental training in a nonreferential or nonreifying manner of meditation allowing for nonconceptual and nondualistic wisdom to unfold. This wisdom realizes the empty, interdependent nature of all outer and inner phenomena, while not forsaking great compassion for sentient beings who are fettered in their delusion. Thus, mindfulness and in particular the fourfold application of mindfulness as taught in Mahāyāna sources—at least in its highly refined form—aims to cultivate a nondualistic mindful awareness imbued with great compassion.

The following excerpts from Mahāyāna discourses are intended to illustrate this. The first discourse presented here is an excerpt from *The Teachings by Akṣayamati* (*Akṣayamatinirdeśa*), an early, comprehensive, and influential Mahāyāna *sūtra*. This *sūtra* explores several key topics of the bodhisattvas' spiritual path, including the Thirty-seven Factors Conducive to Awakening. The passage on the fourfold application of mindfulness offers a compelling example of how mindfulness practice integrates the training in both conventional and ultimate *bodhicitta*. In the context of mindfulness with regard to the body, the *sūtra* states:

> [Bodhisattvas], by the power of precise discernment let go of [any attachment to] their body, which simply exists as an accumulation of the four great elements, and think: "I will exhaust my body by doing whatever is to be done for all sentient beings. Just as the four great outer elements, the element of earth, the element of water, the element of fire and the element of wind, provide beings in various ways, in various forms, in various manners, by means of various objects, various substances and various kinds of pleasure; so in the same way I will transform this body, which exists as an accumulation of the four great elements, completely into something for the

> enjoyment of living beings in various ways, in various forms, in various manners, by means of various objects, various substances and various kinds of pleasure."
> Guided by this motive, [bodhisattvas] consider the body as suffering, but because of their regard for sentient beings, they do not tire from bodily suffering. They consider the impermanence of the body, but do not tire from birth and death. They consider the essencelessness of the body, but do not tire from bringing all sentient beings to maturity. They consider that the body is peaceful, but do not lapse into the passivity of peacefulness. They understand that the body is emptiness, the absence of characteristics, and the absence of longing, void, but do not lapse into the extreme of the body's emptiness, absence of characteristics, absence of longing, and void.

With regard to feelings, the *sūtra* continues:

> Through the mindfulness that accompanies feelings, they feel every feeling that arises, pleasant, unpleasant or neither unpleasant nor pleasant, and cultivate the seeing, the wisdom, that arises by virtue of all these feelings … [Bodhisattvas think:] "With feelings joined to insight and wisdom, through skillful methods in putting an end to all feelings and through accumulating the roots of good embraced by great compassion, I will teach the Dharma so as to set those beings free from all feelings." … Furthermore, to the degree that there is reifying, to such a degree there is mental engagement; to the degree that there is mental engagement, to such a degree there are conceptualizations; to the degree that there are conceptualizations, to such a degree there are feelings. That is why the feelings of immeasurable numbers of beings are said to be immeasurable. In this way, bodhisattvas constantly contemplate feelings with regard to feelings. Thereby they develop their understanding of how feelings arise, dissipate, and abide in all sentient beings. This knowledge of feelings, of the virtuous and nonvirtuous feelings of all beings as they arise, dissipate, and abide, is called bodhisattvas' application of mindfulness that comprises contemplating feelings with regard to feelings

With regard to the mind, the *sūtra* states:

> [Bodhisattvas] think: "Cause and effect are always unfailing; this dependent arising is therefore very profound. The true nature of the mind is precisely this [that is, manifesting but empty of a self-nature]. Yet, all [conventional] phenomena are dependent on causes and conditions. They do not stray [from that nature,] they are without a doer, without an owner; there is no appropriator. [Therefore, although the mind lacks a self-nature, conventionally everything arises because of causes and conditions.] So, I will deliberately accomplish the required causes [for well-being] and exert myself in wholesome accomplishing without neglecting the mind's nature."

> … By virtue of mindfulness and awareness, they abide in the true nature of phenomena, being engaged with certainty in the fact that everything is unarisen, unborn, and unceasing. …

With regard to the dharmas or phenomena, the *sūtra* says:

> Bodhisattvas constantly contemplate phenomena with regard to phenomena; they do not see any phenomenon, however small, that is not dependent arising. … they perceive the truth only and they do not perceive that which is not the truth. … In this way, bodhisattvas constantly contemplate phenomena with regard to phenomena; they see that buddha qualities—awakening, the path, liberation, and deliverance [from the three realms]—can arise from everything. Knowing that every phenomenon [by virtue of its empty nature] leads to deliverance, they reach the gate of [a wise and compassionate] *samādhi* that is called "nonobstruction with regard to all sentient beings."[8] They perceive all phenomena and all emotional defilements as being artificial [that is, not partaking of mind's true nature], thinking: "These phenomena are without emotional defilements; they do not contain defilements. How? They are based in the actuality of the definitive meaning. Therefore, the accumulation of defilements is nonexistent, as is the accumulation of the aggregates. There is neither real desire, nor real aversion nor real delusion. The realization of this [nature] of emotional defilements is awakening, because that which is the essence of defilements is also the essence of the awakened state [both being essentially empty]." … [Bodhisattvas,] being constantly mindful with regard to all phenomena, do not forget this mindfulness or allow it to weaken until the end of time. Contemplating phenomena with regard to phenomena, that is, the application of mindfulness, is a term that designates the immeasurable; it is all-encompassing; all buddha qualities are fully present in it. It is a term [that designates] what accomplishes the well-being of all sentient beings, vanquishes all destructive forces, and realizes self-arisen wisdom.[9]

The second excerpt is from *The Perfection of Wisdom in 25,000 Lines*, the second-longest of the *Prajñāpāramitāsūtras*. It outlines the spiritual training of bodhisattvas across seventy-six chapters, primarily presented as dialogues between the Buddha and his renowned disciples. The excerpt below is taken from the section discussing the Thirty-

---

[8] On the one hand this implies the way in which bodhisattvas connect with sentient beings with boundless compassion and wisdom. On the other hand, the expression "nonobstruction with regard to all sentient beings" points to that all sentient beings are endowed with the potential for awakening. Even though they are temporarily obstructed by the defilements, their mind-itself is utterly pure.

[9] Draszczyk 2024, 105–115. See also *Akṣayamatinirdeśa*. Tibetan version in H 176, vol. 60, 239b–248.

seven Factors Conducive to Awakening. It marks the beginning of the discourse on the fourfold application of mindfulness. Following these introductory statements, the *sūtra* delves extensively into the application of mindfulness with regard to the body.

> Further, Subhūti, with regard to the fourfold application of mindfulness in the great vehicle of bodhisattva mahāsattvas—what are the four?
>
> They are the application of mindfulness with regard to the body, the application of mindfulness with regard to feelings, the application of mindfulness with regard to the mind, and the application of mindfulness with regard to the dharmas/phenomena.
>
> What is the application of mindfulness with regard to the body? Subhūti, in this respect bodhisattva mahāsattvas, with regard to the internal body, contemplate the body in a manner which is not reifying. [Refrain] By virtue of being diligent, clearly knowing and mindful, they are free from any desires and discontent in regard to the world. They engage in the practice, but they do not conceptualize with respect to thoughts connected with the body. With regard to the external body, the body is contemplated in a manner which is not reifying. [Refrain] By virtue (...) With regard to the external and internal body, the body is contemplated in a manner which is not reifying. [Refrain] By virtue (...)
>
> With regard to internal feelings, mind and phenomena, these are contemplated in a manner which is not reifying. [Refrain] By virtue of being diligent, clearly knowing and mindful, they are free from any desires and discontent in regard to the world. They engage in the practice, but they do not conceptualize with respect to thoughts connected with these phenomena.
>
> With regard to external feelings, mind, and phenomena, these are contemplated in a manner which is not reifying. [Refrain] By virtue (...) With regard to external and internal feelings, mind and phenomena, these are contemplated in a manner which is not reifying. [Refrain] By virtue (...)[10]

While there are many similarities with the long Pāli *Discourse on the Application of mindfulness,* there are also some differences:

- A minor difference concerns the sequence of topics in the contemplation with regard to the body. In *The Perfection of Wisdom in 25,000 Lines* the sequence is: (1) bodily postures, (2) physical activities, (3) breathing, (4) bodily elements, (5) anatomical parts, and (6) the corpse in decay.
  The Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta's (M I 55–63) sequence is: (1) breathing, (2)

[10] Draszczyk 2024, 82–88. See also *Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*, Tibetan version H 10, vol. 26, 327b–328a.

bodily postures, (3) physical activities, (4) anatomical parts, (5) bodily elements, and (6) the corpse in decay.

- A major difference relates to *how* attention is to be developed. In the refrain of *The Perfection of Wisdom in 25,000 Lines* the following is repeated time and again: as they are engaging in the fourfold contemplations, bodhisattvas are instructed to cultivate states of mind free from all fixations and reference points, free from reifying; in other words, to develop nondualistic, nonconceptual mindful awareness.
- Another difference concerns the relative lengths of the sections dealing with the four reference points: In *The Perfection of Wisdom in 25,000 Lines* the instructions are given in great detail with regard to the body, while the other three—feelings, the mind, and the dharmas/phenomena—are dealt with only briefly. This might be an indication that in early versions the fourfold application of mindfulness was centered on the body; with this as a basis and integrated in the contemplation of the body, the other three were naturally included.
- A further difference concerns the fourth reference point, phenomena or the dharmas/dhammas. *The Discourse on the Application of mindfulness* (*Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*) deals with five topics designed to deepen the practice of the preceding three, that is, the contemplation with regard to the body, feelings, and the mind. The five topics are (1) the five hindrances, (2) the five aggregates, (3) the six sense fields, (4) the seven factors of awakening, and (5) the four noble truths. *The Perfection of Wisdom in 25,000 Lines* and the other Mahāyāna versions of the fourfold application of mindfulness usually do not deal with these five topics in connection with the fourth reference point, the dharmas.

All in all, the section on the fourfold application of mindfulness in *The Perfection of Wisdom in 25,000 Lines* serves as a fine example of both the similarities between the Theravāda and Mahāyāna scriptures and of the specific emphasis on nonconceptual wisdom that is central to Mahāyāna teachings.

The meditation practice outlined in *The Teachings by Akṣayamati*, in *The Perfection of Wisdom in 25,000 Lines*, and numerous other Mahāyāna *sūtra*s, have been further elaborated by various teachers in India and in Tibet. These include masters from the Dakpo Kagyu schools in Tibet, as well as their Indian predecessors, such as Saraha and Maitrīpa (approx. 986–1063). The umbrella term for these teachings, as transmitted by Saraha, Maitrīpa, and Tibetan Dakpo Kagyu teachers, is

mahāmudrā. In Tibetan Buddhism these instructions were significantly shaped by Gampopa (1079–1153) and later often referred to as Dakpo Mahāmudrā.

Before delving further into this tradition, I would like to note that the practice of mindfulness in the context of the Mahāmudrā tradition incorporates both mindfulness (*smṛti*) and non[-dual] mindfulness (*asmṛti*) to attain profound, non-conceptual realization (*amanasikāra*), which transcends dualistic distinctions. The next section provides background information on this topic:

"Mahāmudrā" is a Sanskrit compound. In the context of Buddhism, it is primarily associated with the practice of Vajrayāna, the Buddhist *tantra*s. Literally translated, *mahā* means "great" and *mudrā* means "symbol" or "seal." In the context of the Buddhist *tantra*s, Mahāmudrā usually refers to mind's inherent wisdom, its emptiness and luminosity, which can be experienced during a tantric empowerment. However, in the Dakpo Mahāmudrā traditions, it can also be practiced outside the framework of the complex Buddhist *tantra*s.

The practice of Dakpo Mahāmudrā, particularly in its non-tantric form, became synonymous with the term *amanasikāra* as used by the Mahāmudrā master Maitrīpa. Maitrīpa, a prominent scholar-practitioner, used this term to describe a state of mind that is non-reifying and non-conceptual. The most common English translation of *amanasikāra* is "mental nonengagement," rendering the prefix "*a*" as a negation of "*manasikāra*," that is mental engagement or attention. However, *amanasikāra* can also be interpreted in a more profound sense, with "*a*" signifying nonorigination or emptiness, and "*manasikāra*" referring to the state of mind that recognizes emptiness.[11] Maitrīpa employed *amanasikāra* in this latter sense, representing non-conceptual realization or the "Mahāmudrā of awareness and emptiness." The term denotes a non-dual, naturally pure and luminous mind, which directly apprehends reality without reification. This interpretation aligns *amanasikāra* with references found in various *sūtra*s.

Maitrīpa's use of *amanasikāra* is in contrast to the way how Kamalaśīla (8th century), another key figure in Indian Buddhist scholarship, used the term *amanasikāra*. For Kamalaśīla, it meant *yoniśo manasikāra*—"well-founded mental engagement"—a method of progressively realizing emptiness through reasoning and conceptual analysis. While Kamalaśīla's approach is analytical, Maitrīpa suggests a more direct, non-conceptual path of wisdom that emphasizes experiential recognition of the mind's luminous nature. However, both Maitrīpa and Kamalaśīla share the view that—in this context—*amanasikāra* is not an absence of mental activity or a withdrawal of attention in particular

[11] For details on Maitrīpa, see Mathes 2021.

ways, but a form of mental engagement that cultivates non-conceptual wisdom. It should also be noted that Maitrīpa's emphasis on direct experience in the framework of the Mahāmudrā tradition includes both gradual and sudden approaches to realization.

The other key figure of Dakpo Mahāmudrā mentioned above is the Indian mahāsiddha Saraha. He is a legendary figure, with little concrete information about his life. While modern scholars place him around the ninth century CE, based primarily on the dating of texts he commented on, traditional Tibetan sources place him within a broad historical range—from two generations after the Buddha, as a disciple of the Buddha's son, Rāhula, to the second century CE, as the guru of Nāgārjuna. This latter view is especially prevalent in the Kagyu traditions. It is said that Saraha was an esteemed Brahmin who encountered a woman—who was, in fact, a wisdom *ḍākinī*—carving arrows in a marketplace. This *ḍākinī* is believed to have introduced Saraha to Mahāmudrā through symbolic gestures or signs, key instructions which helped Saraha realize the true nature of the mind. According to tradition, the two then traveled across the land, teaching others through songs. These songs, known as *dohā*s, form a significant source for the Kagyu teachings on Mahāmudrā.

In his songs, Saraha employs these symbolic signs or key instructions in the following sequence: (1) mindfulness (*smṛti*), (2) non-dual mindfulness (*asmṛti*), (3) nonarising, and (4) transcending the intellect.

The first key instruction "mindfulness," pertains to the common meaning of Buddhist mindfulness practice—registering whatever is experienced, focusing the mind without distraction with the goal to cultivate focused attention and sustained introspective awareness (*smṛti*). Through the second key instruction, "non-dual mindfulness," practitioners gradually come to understand the emptiness of all appearances and perceptions. It is emphasized that phenomena in the external world are devoid of inherent existence and arise solely in the perceiving mind, which too is empty of an inherent essence (without an object, there is no subject). In this way, the illusory nature of all things becomes apparent. As the dichotomy between perceiver and perceived vanishes, mindfulness transforms into non-dual mindfulness (*asmṛti*). This shift allows the practitioner to relinquish the attachment to "I" and "mine."

Further cultivating the practice, supported by the third key instruction of non-arising, the practitioner becomes able to unify appearance and mind in "a single taste." This realization implies the understanding that appearances and emptiness are inseparable. Practitioners recognize that experiences within the duality of self and other never truly

arose. Mind itself, being empty of self-nature and luminous, is recognized as non-arisen.

Through continued cultivation of this insight, practitioners transcend all tendencies toward dualistic perception, ultimately transcending the intellect, the fourth key instruction. Saraha captures the second stage of this process when he states:

> Mindfully sustaining the mindfulness of illusion-like appearances, nothing whatsoever is seen; there is only non-dual mindfulness.[12]

With regard to the third and fourth key instruction, he says:

> This mindfulness is unborn; it is the source of all accomplishments. Not reifying anything, whether inner or outer, all will be accomplished.[13]

Thus, *asmṛti* or non[dual] mindfulness signifies the mindfulness that is aware of the emptiness and illusory nature of all appearances, free from conceptual reification, leading to *amanasikāra* or nonconceptual realization.

This approach to the practice of mindfulness where *asmṛti* and *amanasikāra* play a key role, can already be found in several Mahāyāna *sūtra*s, such as *The Questions of Sāgaramati* (*Sāgaramatiparipṛcchā*) and *The Teachings of the Buddha* (*Buddhasaṃgīti*). In the former we find the following description:

> The body, feelings, the mind, and phenomena are realized as *dharma* [that is, as they truly are], which points to the [fourfold] application of mindfulness, that is non[dual] mindfulness and non[conceptual] realization. (…)[14]

In *The Teachings of the Buddha* (*Buddhasaṃgīti*) it is said:

> Mañjuśrī: "How does one constantly practice mindfulness"?
> [Buddha:] "By way of non[dual] mindfulness and non[conceptual] realization with regard to all phenomena."[15]

Maitrīpa relied on both these *sūtra*s and Saraha's key instructions and employed *asmṛti* and *amanasikāra* within the context of teaching Mahāmudrā. With his scholarly background, Maitrīpa explained their use in philosophical categories. He points out that *amanasikāra* signifies a so-called implicative negation, indicating the mind's lack of inherent

---

12 Draszczyk 2024, 153. See also Saraha 1991a, 214–227, verse 28a–b.
13 Ibid., 153. See also Saraha 1991b, 113–115, verse 47c–d.
14 Draszczyk 2024, 66. See also *Sāgaramatiparipṛcchā*, Tibetan version H 153, vol. 58, 33b.
15 Draszczyk 2024, 148. See also *Buddhasaṃgīti*, Tibetan version D 228, 415.

self-nature, while affirming its unimpeded luminosity—wisdom and compassion as inseparable. Maitrīpa's teachings, rooted in this approach, made his instructions accessible even to beginners.

The terminology of mindfulness versus non-dual mindfulness, used by Indian Buddhist masters such as Saraha and Maitrīpa, did not become standardized in Tibetan Buddhism. Nevertheless, it was adopted by some scholar-practitioners, notably Karmapa Mikyö Dorje and Padma Karpo.

Padma Karpo (1527–1592) was one of the most important masters of the Drukpa Kagyu tradition, its lineage holder, and a prolific author. In his *Mahāmudrā Treasury of the Victorious Ones* he delves into the connection between mindfulness and Dakpo Mahāmudrā; as a reference he uses a commentary on the well-known *Mañjuśrīsaṃgīti Tantra*:

> *The Great Commentary to the Mañjuśrīsaṃgīti* states: "The essence of mindfulness is emptiness, is absence of characteristics, is absence of longing, and is endowment with natural luminosity. Because it possesses hundreds and thousands of meditative absorptions such as the hero-like *samādhi*, mindfulness [with these] four [features] is the king of *samādhi*." Thus, mahāmudrā itself is the presence in mindfulness.[16]

The Eighth Karmapa, Mikyö Dorje (East Tibet, 1507–1554), one of the most important philosophers of Tibetan Buddhism and a lineage holder of the Karma Kagyu tradition, states:

> The perfection of wisdom as [taught by Maitrīpa] is not separate from mindfulness and mental engagement; it consists in the absence of that type of mindfulness and mental engagement which cling to any form of extreme mental elaborations. It was taught as the unsurpassable view and meditation of the perfection of wisdom as revealed in the *sūtra*s and *tantra*s. (…)
> So the type of mindfulness and mental engagement which is non[dual] mindfulness and non[conceptual] realization is not just the definitive meaning of the *sūtra*s, but the unsurpassable definitive view and meditation of the completion processes of *mantra*[-practice].[17]

In Tibetan Buddhism, both the general Mahāyāna and specific tantric practices are part of the Bodhisattva's vehicle, which is considered synonymous with Mahāyāna. "*Sūtra*" refers to the Buddha's common

---

[16] Draszczyk 2024, 141. See also Padma Karpo 2005, 305.

[17] Draszczyk 2024, 149–150. See also. See also Karmapa Mikyö Dorje 2013, vol. 3, 81.5–16.

teachings on view, meditation, and ethics, while "*tantra*" refers to uncommon supplementary meditative practices designed to enhance a bodhisattva's spiritual progress.

In essence, Buddhist tantric meditation—that is, the creation and completion processes—require a stable quality of mindfulness and clear knowing. More precisely, tantric meditations amount to a certain type of the fourfold application of mindfulness with regard to the body, to feelings, to the mind, and to the dharmas/phenomena. In the instructions commonly given on the creation and completion processes, the connection with the fourfold application of mindfulness is not usually explicitly stated. However, some of the basic tantric texts as well as commentaries on tantric practices offer a clear picture of the tantric views and practices regarding the fourfold application of mindfulness.

The following description of a very simple tantric meditation illustrates in broad terms how the fourfold application of mindfulness regarding the body, feelings, the mind, and the dharmas/phenomena is practiced in connection with the Buddhist *tantra*s. Usually, certain prerequisites apply to a tantric meditation, such as the relevant empowerment. However, there are exceptions. One of these is an easily practiced but very effective form of meditation on the embodiment of wisdom and compassion called Avalokiteśvara in the tradition of the mahāsiddha Karma Pakshi (thirteenth century).[18] While this meditation can exemplify the basic principle of the tantric fourfold application of mindfulness, we should bear in mind that where more complex tantric meditations are involved, these principles would also require more complex explanations.

(1) Mindfulness with regard to the body: the physical appearance of Avalokiteśvara is generated as a mental image. Focusing on this visualization strengthens inner calm. In his vivid appearance, embodying boundless wisdom, loving kindness, and compassion, the sheer presence of Avalokiteśvara is felt as a stabilizing support. The meditators also cultivate the awareness that the rainbow-like imagined physical manifestation of Avalokiteśvara is insubstantial and unreal, devoid of an inherent self-nature. Meditators thus train in the experience of the unity of appearance and emptiness. They also understand this unity of appearance and emptiness to be the nature of all bodies, of all appearances, that is, of their own body, of the body of other sentient beings, and of any type of physical manifestations such as the "bodies" of sight, sound, smell, taste, and touchable things. All manifestations are experienced as simultaneously appearing and empty of a self-nature:

---

[18] See for example the explanations on this practice in Karma Chagme 2002, vol. 2, 262–269. See also Wallace 1998, 49–61.

as they manifest, they are experienced to have their features and effectiveness, yet all the while they are devoid of a substantial nature. Furthermore, during this meditation on the unity of pure manifestation and emptiness, meditators allow their minds to be completely at ease and joyful. They are thereby "sealing" their experience with joy.

(2) Mindfulness with regard to feelings: embedded in the mindfulness with regard to the body, in particular as to the physical manifestation of Avalokiteśvara as detailed above, meditators are aware of any type of feelings, pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral. They are aware of them as they manifest without attributing a substantial nature to them. This opens the pathway to experiencing feelings as the unity of bliss and emptiness.

(3 + 4) Mindfulness with regard to the mind and to the dharmas/phenomena: having first generated the mental image of Avalokiteśvara and gone through the steps in the visualization and the associated mantra recitation, meditators complete the practice by dissolving the mental image of Avalokiteśvara. Then the mind is allowed to abide in its true nature, self-aware and self-luminous. A text composed by the mahāsiddha Tangtong Gyalpo (1361–1485 CE) describing the meditation on Avalokiteśvara says at this point:

> Now, the outer world is the pure land of Sukhāvatī, and body, speech, and mind of sentient beings, the world's content, are inseparable from Avalokiteśvara's body, speech, and mind: appearance, sound, and awareness are inseparable from emptiness. (…) Any recognitions and thoughts occur in the expanse of great wisdom.[19]

In this phase, meditators cultivate deep insight by abiding in the unobstructed, empty and nondualistic nature of mind, free from any fixation on "I" and "mine." Whatever is known, felt, or remembered—any *dharma*/phenomenon—is experienced as the simultaneity of appearance and emptiness, of bliss and emptiness, of clarity and emptiness.

The Fifth Shamarpa, Könchog Yenlak (1525–1583), in his commentary on *The Profound Inner Meaning* (*Zab mo nang don*) by the Third Karmapa, Rangjung Dorje, encapsulates the tantric practice of the fourfold application of mindfulness by stating:

> We could also say that the application of mindfulness with regard to the body, the mind, phenomena, and feelings means that our

[19] Draszczyk 2021, 24–25.

> body appears as the buddha aspect, the buddha aspect as the mind, the mind as emptiness, and emptiness manifests as great bliss.[20]

In closing, I would like to quote from the *Śrī Vajramaṇḍālaṃkāra*:

> Those who constantly meditate on the supreme wisdom of nonduality equal the incomparable Buddha. When, by virtue of this supreme *yoga*, we meditate on the supreme ground of the fourfold application of mindfulness, we will soon become like the *vajra*-holder [that is, a buddha].[21]

Bibliography

List of Abbreviations

D Derge edition of Bka' 'gyur and Bstan 'gyur. *The Tibetan Tripiṭaka*, Taipei Edition. Taipei, Taiwan: SMC Publishing, 1991.

H Lhasa edition of the Bka' 'gyur and Bstan 'gyur. Lhasa: Zhol par khang, 1934.

Primary Sources

Akṣayamatinirdeśa Nāma Mahāyāna Sūtra. *Blo gros mi zad pas bstan pa zhes bya ba theg pa chen po'i mdo* (*The Teachings by Akṣayamati*). H 176, *mdo sde, pha* 122b–270b, vol. 60.

Karma Chagme, Khedrub. 2002. *Phyag rdzogs zung 'jug thos pa don ldan 'gro don rgya mtsho'i lung gi gter mdzod* (*The Union of Mahāmudrā and Ati Yoga, the Treasury of an Oceanlike Teaching for the Benefit of Beings Which is Meaningful to Hear*). 2 vols. Varanasi: Vajra Vidya Library.

Karmapa Mikyö Dorje. 2013. *Sku gsum ngo sprod rnam bshad* (*Explanation of the Introduction into the Three Embodiments*). Full title: *Sku gsum ngo sprod kyi rnam par bshad pa mdo rgyud bstan pa mtha' dag gi e vaṃ phyag rgya*. 3 vols, Varanasi: Vajra Vidya Institute Library.

Karmapa Wangchug Dorje. 2003. *Chos mngon mdzod kyi rnam par bshad pa chos mngon rgya tsho'i snying po mkhyen brtse'i zhal lung gzhon nu rnam rol legs bshad cho mig rma 'byed grub bde'i shing rta* (*A Commentary on Vasubandhu's Abhidharmakoṣabhāṣya*). Varanasi: Vajra Vidya Institute Library.

---

[20] Draszczyk 2024, 139. See also Shamar Könchog Yenlak 2020, 39–40.

[21] Draszczyk 2024, 139. See also *Śrī Vajramaṇḍālaṃkāra Mahātantrarājā*, H 459, vol. 86, 32b.

Padma Karpo. 2005. *Phyag chen rgyal ba'i gan mdzod* (*Mahāmudrā Treasury of the Victorious Ones*). Varanasi: Vidhyadhara book edition.

Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrika Prajñāpāramitā. Shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin pa stong phrag nyi shu lnga pa (*The Perfection of Wisdom in 25,000 Lines*). H 10, vols. 26–28, *ka* 1b–*ga* 537b and D 9, vols. 26–28, *ka* 1b–382a; *kha* 1b–393a; *ga* 1b–381a.

Ratnacūḍaparipṛcchā Nāma Mahāyāna Sūtra. 'Phags pa gtsug na rin po ches zhus pa zhes bya pa theg pa chen po'i mdo (*The Questions of Ratnacūḍa*). D 91, vol. 44, *cha* 210a–254b and H 91, vol. 40, *cha* 350a–418a.

Śrī Vajramaṇḍālaṃkāra Mahātantrarājā. Dpal rdo rje snying po rgyan ces bya ba'i rgyud kyi rgyal po chen po. D 490, vol. 86, *tha* 1b–82a and H 459, vol. 86, *nya* 1b–120b.

Saddharmasmṛtyupasthāna Sūtra. Dam pa'i chos dran pa nye bar gzhag pa'i mdo (*The Application of Mindfulness of the Sacred Dharma*). D 287, vols. 68–71, *ya* 82a–318a; *ra* 1b–307a; *la* 1b–312a; *sha* 1b–229b and H 289, vols. 68–71, *za* 171a–516a; *'a* 1b–478a; *ya* 1b–521a; *ra* 1b–355b.

Sāgaramatiparipṛcchā Nāma Mahāyāna Sūtra. Blo gros rgya mtshos zhus pa zhes bya ba theg pa chen po'i mdo (*The Questions of Sāgaramati*). D 152, vol. 58, *pha* 1b–115b and H 153, vol. 58, *na* 1b–180a.

Saraha. 1991a. *Kāya Koṣāmrita Vajra Gīti. Sku'i mdzod 'chi med rdo rje'u glu* (*Vajra Song, Immortal Body Treasury*). D 2269, *rgyud zhi*, 214–27.

____. 1991b. *Bāk Koṣa Rucira Svara Vajra Gīti. Gsung gi mdzod 'jam dbyangs rdo rje'i glu* (*Mañjugoṣa's Vajra Song, The Treasury of Speach*). D 2270, *rgyud zhi*, 113–115.

Shamar Könchog Yenlag. 2020, *Zab mo nang don gyi mchan bu mngon sum lam byed* (*Annotations on the Profound Inner Meaning, Making Direct Perception the Path*). Dharmadownload. Dharmadownload.net. Accessed July 8, 2022.

Vasubandhu. *Abhidharmakoṣabhāṣya. Chos mngon pa mdzod kyi rang 'grel*. (*Auto-Commentary on the Treasury of the Abhidharma*). Varanasi: Gelugpa Students' Welfare Committee. 1998.

Secondary Sources

Anālayo, Bhikkhu. 2013. *Perspectives on Satipaṭṭhāna*. Cambridge: Windhorse Publications.

Draszczyk, Martina. 2024. *The Buddha's Gift to the World: A Practitioner's Guide to the Roots of Mindfulness. An Exploration across Indian and Tibetan Traditions*. Boulder: Shambala Publications.

____ trans. 2021. *Das Wohl der Wesen, das den Raum erfüllt. Meditation und Rezitation des Großen Mitfühlenden*. Vienna: Bodhi Verlag. (First edition 2000).

Higgins, David and Martina Draszczyk. 2019. *Buddha Nature Reconsidered. The Eighth Karmapa's Middle Path.* Wiener Studien zur Tibetologie und Buddhismuskunde, Heft 95.1–2. Wien: Arbeitskreis für Tibetische und Buddhistische Studien der Universität Wien.

Mathes, Klaus-Dieter. 2021. Maitrīpa. India's Yogi of Nondual Bliss. Boulder: Shambala Publications.

Pesala, Bhikkhu, trans. 2021. *The Debate of King Milinda.* By Nāgasena. Edited and abridged by Bhikkhu Pesala. Association for Insight Meditation. Last modified August 2021. http://www.aimwell.org/milinda.html.

Wallace, B. Alan, trans. 1998. *A Spacious Path to Freedom. Practical Instructions on the Union of Mahāmudrā and Atiyoga by Karma Chagmé with Commentary by Gyatrul Rinpoche*. Ithaca, New York: Snow Lion Publications.

❖