

# **Mindfulness in the Tibetan Tradition**

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For the 3<sup>rd</sup> Conference of the International Association of  
Buddhist University,  
May 6-8, 2017, Thailand

## **Introduction**

The concepts of view and path must always be kept in mind when discussing mindfulness practices in the Vajrayana tradition. Mindfulness practices can be viewed as six progressive stages or can be condensed into two progressive stages. First the six stages will be presented and then the two condensed stages.

### **I. Six Stages of Mindfulness Practice**

Tibetan great Master Longchen Rabjam (1308-1364) says:

*As beginners we should apply deliberate mindfulness without distraction.*

*Training ourselves in meditative equipoise and post meditation,  
we should apply the mindfulness of Dharmatā.*

*When accustomed to this, thoughts and perceptions (in post meditation)  
should be practiced as the mindfulness of wisdom.*

*When having gained mastery in terms of direct experience,  
there is no distracting object and no one being distracted.*

*Within the accomplished state of stability,  
objects of distractions are ascertained as the Dharmatā.*

*When phenomena exhaust themselves, they go beyond all  
objects of verbal expression.*

*Having gained such measure of realisation,  
may we perform the conduct.*

Mindfulness practices can be broken down into six progressive stages: 1) deliberate mindfulness or mindfulness of effort, 2) mindfulness of dharmatā or mindfulness of the nature of phenomena, 3) mindfulness of appearances in post-meditation, 4) direct experience mindfulness, 5) mindfulness of experiential domains, and 6) mindfulness of the exhaustion of all phenomena.

### 1. Deliberate Mindfulness (Tibetan: *'du byed kyi dran pa*)

As it is said,

“ apply deliberate mindfulness without distraction.”

#### a) View

In the Mahāyāna tradition, which is often associated with the Vajrayāna tradition, the view is of utmost importance. This must be understood. ‘View’ here means searching for the truth of ultimate reality in our meditation.

#### b) Path

Once the practitioner begins to understand this view, he or she takes mindfulness as the path, it is a way of training in this view.

Deliberate mindfulness or mindfulness with effort in the Mahāyāna tradition is practiced through the four foundations

of mindfulness: mindfulness of body, of feelings, of mind, and of phenomena. One comes to understand that the body, feelings, mind, and phenomena do not exist independently, i.e. they have no independent, inherent nature. In other words, they are empty in nature. This means there is no experiencer or perceiver of the body, feelings, mind, and phenomena at this point.

The reason it is called deliberate mindfulness is because, when our minds become distracted, it brings us back to the view again and again. In the same way, if you want the light to come on in a room at night, a conscious act is necessary. You must put your finger on the light-switch and press it; the light doesn't turn itself on.

## 2. Mindfulness of Dharmatā or Mindfulness of the Nature of Phenomena (Tib: *chos nyid kyi dran pa*)

As it is said,  
when “training ourselves in meditative equipoise and post meditation, we should apply the mindfulness of Dharmatā without distraction.”

### a) View

Dharmatā is synonymous with the view of ‘suchness’, which is also referred to as emptiness. This form of mindfulness is a path that sustains the view of Dharmatā. This means that we are able to experience the moment when thoughts and emotions cease and we remain in bare, naked awareness, in a state purified of thoughts. In other words, all distraction has vanished into the state of Dharmatā.

### b) Path

Once the practitioner begins to understand this view, he or

she takes mindfulness as the path, it is a way of training in this view. In the beginning, thoughts are like snow flakes falling on the surface of a lake. The lake is a body of water. The snowflakes are also water. When they meet, they mingle indivisibly. The snow flakes are like thoughts, and the lake is like the Dharmatā. When thoughts vanish into Dharmatā, the thoughts have no power to exist on their own. The crucial point here is to be mindful of the vanishing aspect of thoughts and to relax naturally.

### 3. Mindfulness of appearances in post-meditation : (Tib: *rjes snang gyi dran pa*)

As it is said,  
“when accustomed to this, thoughts and perceptions(in post meditation)  
should be practiced as the mindfulness of wisdom without distraction.”

#### a) View

The view of the illusionary nature of phenomena, or absolute truth, can be been expressed in many different ways. Examples of this from the Mahayana sutras and shastras are:

It is said in the *Sūtra of the Noble Collection*:

Know the five skandhas are like an illusion  
Don't separate the illusion from the skandhas  
Free of thinking that anything is real-  
This is perfect wisdom's conduct as its best!

It is said in the *King of Samādhi Sūtra*:

When in the noonday heat of the sun in the summer,  
Someone tormented by thirst wanders on and on,  
Then starts seeing patches of water, but these are mirages  
Know that all phenomena are like that.

Although there is no water in these mirages  
Beings in the darkness of the mind want a drink of it.  
They cannot drink the water; it is unreal.  
Know that all phenomena are like that.

From Nāāgarjuna's *Knowledge Fundamental to the Middle Way*:

Like a dream, like an illusion,  
Like a city of gandharvas,  
That's how birth, and that's how living,  
That's how dying are taught to be.

#### b) Path

The practice here is to bring mindfulness of *dharmatā* (the nature of phenomena) into post-meditation or ordinary activities. This means that in everyday life, whenever thoughts arise we train in recognising them as a display of the nature of mind or of Dharmatā. Thoughts are seen as being a reflection of Dharmatā (the true essence of thoughts). In other words, they are merely dream-like and illusionary. One needs mindfulness to constantly remind oneself to stay on track, i.e. to see thoughts in their true nature.

#### 4. Direct experience mindfulness (Tib: *mngon sum gyi dran pa*)

As it is said,  
“when having gained mastery in terms of direct experience,

there is no distracting object and no one being distracted.”

a) View

Same as above.

b) Path

By diligently training in the mindfulness of appearances in post-meditation in our daily activities, such as eating, talking and so on, we become masters of mindfulness of *dharmatā* in post-meditation, in the sense that we do not lose the natural state of the mind, i.e. the mindfulness of *dharmatā*, in our ordinary activities. this is direct mindfulness in which one stably attains the mindfulness of dharmata *and* remains in it continually.

5. Mindfulness of Experiential Domains (Tib: *spyod yul gyi dran pa*)

As it is said,

“within the accomplished state of stability, objects of distractions are ascertained as the Dharmatā.”

a) View

Same as above.

b) Path

This kind of mindfulness meditation involves the training to intentionally blend meditation (samadhi) and non-meditation (post-meditation). There is no difference between the thought arising and the thought ceasing. Arising and ceasing happens simultaneously. Arising is ceasing and ceasing is arising. The meditator experiences this. There is a perfect balance, a continuity of non-distraction present

throughout meditation and non-meditation.

Normally the arising and ceasing of thoughts is in relation to time and space. But here, we are talking about the point beyond time and space, because arising and ceasing are happening simultaneously.

## 6. Mindfulness of the Exhaustion of All Phenomena (Tib: *chos zad kyi dran pa*)

As it is said,  
“when phenomena exhaust themselves, they go beyond all objects of verbal expression.”

### a) View

Through the aforementioned five mindfulness practices, one realises absolute truth, which means that all experiences are experienced beyond time and space. At this moment, all the obscuring layers — habitual patterns of the afflictive obscurations (Skt: *kleśāvaraṇa*) and cognitive obscurations (Skt: *jñeyāvaraṇa*) — are eliminated and we abide in our own bare awareness, completely pure without any distractions.

### b) Path

Once the practitioner begins to understand this view, he or she takes mindfulness as the path; it is a way of training in this view.

## II. Two Stages of Mindfulness Practice

The two stages of mindfulness practice are: 1) deliberate mindfulness, and 2) effortless or innate mindfulness.

1. Deliberate Mindfulness or Mindfulness with Effort (Tib: *'du byed kyi dran pa*)

This is the same as explained above.

2. Effortless Mindfulness (Tibetan: *'du byed med pa' dran pa*)

At this stage, the practitioner's view — because of practicing deliberate mindfulness — has become more stable.

Now with effortless mindfulness practice, the moment we notice that we are carried away, we realise that we are distracted. By recognising the identity of who has been distracted, we automatically arrive back at the view. This moment is like pressing the light-switch. Once the light is on, you do not have to keep on pressing it. But after a while, we tend to forget and we get distracted again.

When this happens, we must re-apply deliberate mindfulness. First apply the method; then, once you are in the natural state, simply allow it to continue, without further exertion. Here there is a sense of natural ongoingness or continuity.

It is called effortless mindfulness because here, aside from the slight exertion of acknowledging "i have wandered off," no additional conceptual effort is needed. instead, it is more spontaneous; there is no transformation involved here at all. It is the original state of awareness that is sustained by natural mindfulness. merely recognising that one has wandered off settles the mind in its original state without requiring any additional effort. We need to train in this again and again.

