

Mahamudra Vision

Trust your senses, polish your enlightenment lenses

by Veena Gokhale

« The body is essentially empty like the stem of a reed,
And the mind, like pure space, utterly transcends
the world of thought :
Relax into your intrinsic nature with neither abandon nor control –
Mind with no objective is Mahamudra –
And, with practice perfected, supreme enlightenment is gained »

(From Tilopa's Mahamudra Instruction to Naropa in Twenty Eight Verses)

An exciting event took place at the Shambhala Ottawa Centre in fall 2004 - a weekend seminar called "Mahamudra Vision, A Shambhala Buddhist Approach to Mind and Art," taught by Acharya John Rockwell and Stéphane Bédard. It was the first time that these illustrious teachers had collaborated in this way.

Ashe Acharya Rockwell is a former co-Director of Karmê Chöling Meditation Center, former Director of Shambhala International and one of the early members of the Nalanda Translation Committee, among other things. Bédard is an Ottawa-based ikebana master, Shambhala Art and Meditation instructor, teacher and translator of Buddhist texts into French.

The seminar promised "meditation practice, investigation of mind-sutra mahamudra, and exercises of perception and creativity." The evening of Friday, October 22nd, saw some 40 participants, seated in the Centre's bright and beautiful shrine room. People had come from nearby Gatineau, as well as Toronto and around, and Montreal. And one person had even come down from Halifax.

"Mahamudra is one of the most advanced teachings, however, everything Trungpa Rinpoche did was soaked in the mahamudra vision," said Acharya Rockwell, speaking after the opening meditation session. He explained that he had wanted to introduce more art in his mahamudra instruction – the reason for his collaboration with Bédard. As the seminar unfolded, it became clearer why this was a good idea.

Mahamudra believes in the infallibility of the direct experience of the nature of mind; and uses the exploration of sensory perception as one way to gain that understanding.

It made sense therefore to hone the senses through creative exercises, between the challenging meditation exercises. The art brought some relief, even as it stoked our passion and heightened our perception. The workshop effectively created an expansive mood, which made creativity and discovery possible.

Acharya Rockwell said that the Mahamudra practice focuses primarily on mind. The central idea is to come to understand what mind is – certainly not an easy endeavor! Mind is something we take for granted, like the air that surrounds us. We may only become conscious of the presence of air when we are underwater. We can also become conscious of mind, through deliberate, sense-oriented practice.

Mahamudra takes a fruition, rather than a path view. It says: Everything is present right here. “Your mind is like space, and within it, is a sun shining. Clouds seem to come along and cover it. But Mahamudra maintains that we are the sun. And clouds are not a problem for the sun,” said Acharya Rockwell.

The attempt is to become familiar with the clouds and the rain – not to reject any part of our emotional / intellectual barometer, as it were. “Everything’s a display of mindfulness, awareness, everything’s reflecting the natural brilliance of mind back to you, telling you who you are. This means practice can take place any time and any place,” he continued encouragingly. He also explained that mudra literally meant seal, gesture or symbol. The Mahamudra vision holds that everything is stamped with the seal of basic goodness. We were therefore asked to reflect back on our Shambhala Level 1 practice around basic goodness.

The emphasis this weekend was on practice not theory. There was also less discussion of how things were going for the participants, than one usually finds in the Shambhala Levels. Seemingly, we were being egged on to experience the profound truth of mahamudra for ourselves, i.e. through our own direct experience, or at least catch a glimpse of it.

Day two commenced with the somewhat unsettling practice of mahamudra shamatha. The instructions were:

- Don’t meditate, i.e., split into a meditator and a meditation object. (For us this meant not to follow the breath.)
- Don’t wander even for an instant. If thoughts arise, simply recognize them and let them pass.
- Don’t fabricate or try to create any special kind of experience.

Suddenly we did not have the breath, or the floor, to focus on! There was nothing to hold on to. As a long-time practitioner, who is a teacher himself, put it, “This weekend has consisted of the most groundless practices I have ever undertaken.” Acharya Rockwell had thankfully told us that it was natural to feel confused, even frustrated with the mahamudra investigations, in the short term. He asked us to stay the course and see where it would lead us.

Mahamudra shamatha was followed by mahamudra vipashyana. We were asked to observe what was taking place in the “still” and then the “moving mind.” We had to look directly, not think or intellectualize. “Mahamudra is a heart practice,” said Acharya Rockwell. We were encouraged to taste and feel our mind. We were given questions to “perk our intelligence.” Does

still/empty mind have colour, shape, size? Is it inside or outside the body? We were also asked to make a distinction between how things appear, and how they really are. We were advised that relaxation was the key; this was not about hunting down the mind at any cost!

We were also asked to investigate thought. Mahamudra does not have a bias towards the calm mind of traditional shamatha practice. It believes that we need to understand the nature of thought, since thoughts are so central to our being. It encourages practitioners to invite thoughts in, and study them. Normally we are caught up in the surface of thoughts. We needed to ask ourselves questions like - where do thoughts arise? How do they cease? Are they inside or outside? We could also look at emotion in the same manner, as a variant of thought.

The instructions seemed deliberately paradoxical. There was a lot of play on preconceptions. In doing the mind exercise I found that my mind was "everywhere." As for studying thoughts, they seemed to "dissipate" when I made them my focus! (We had been warned that this could happen.)

The discussion that followed led us to the conclusion that thoughts were like ghosts – elusive, slipping away when we tried to grasp and analyze them. "Yet our problem is that we get caught up in our thoughts, in our notions of mind and thought," said Acharya Rockwell. Thoughts appear, but do not exist as such. Hence, just looking at them, or letting them go, appears to be the best way to deal with them. And yet how hard that is in real life!

Our first art exercise – calligraphy - led by Bédard, set the tone for the rich flow of spontaneous creativity that followed. We had to make three strokes with an ink-stained brush, signifying heaven (vision, space, non-thought), earth (base, practicality, foundation, solidity) and man or human being (uniting heaven and earth). This same system was used in later exercises - collage making, arranging objects on a plastic sheet "mandala" and poetry writing.

"Don't think too much. First thought best thought. Be aware and in the moment. Be spontaneous, not impulsive," were some of the instructions from Bédard. At the end of each exercise, looking mindfully at everyone's work, illustrated how everything had the seal of basic goodness.

Chögyam Trungpa, we were told, was a great believer in using art and all kinds of different methods to deepen meditation practice. "When you genuinely practice any art you can't hide nor lie to yourself for too long," said Bédard. "It is another tool for understanding the mind." From the Shambhala Art perspective, art invites richness, joy, beauty, harmony, openness and peacefulness. It is important to connect with our initial fear, to let it be and let it transform itself into free expression.

"This kind of art," he continued, "is also a mind-offering. Art is always an offering, it doesn't belong to us. You can learn who you are by deepening the practice of your art. It is about using what we have to enchant ourselves and others." We were amazed by the variety and validity of our creations, throughout the workshop. "Some of these could be in a gallery," I heard one

participant remark.

Day 3 started with sense explorations, “an investigation of appearances,” as the mahamudra tradition puts it. We had to ask ourselves: Is mind the same or different from sense perceptions? If different, where do they meet? Is the mind a mirror in which the objects get reflected or does the mind go out and touch them? We did this exercise with sight, sound and body.

Having already experienced that my mind was everywhere, I felt the distinctions – inside, outside, body, space - starting to blur. I felt the “hollowness” within my body and the spaciousness within the room, even though there were objects and people in it. Since I was also taking a weekly class on “Emptiness,” I thought – “Yes form could be emptiness and emptiness form. Maybe all these far-out Buddhist teachings are true after all!” I felt I had been jolted out of many preconceptions, all at once. As these ideas started to sink in, I went into a state of profound shock and started to edge towards denial. “I am impressionable and since this is what I am supposed to feel, that’s what I have convinced myself I am feeling!” was one thought. “No way I can feel like this again and therefore this is not real,” was another.

Discussion followed these investigations. One participant said: “The body is the last frontier in a sense, so seeing its insubstantiality is scary. I am also realizing how much time we spend on shoring up our beliefs.”

“When we look directly at our sense perceptions, we see that the whole world is our body,” said Acharya Rockwell. “The experiential boundary between our body and the world is not fixed, like we think it is.

One participant I talked to later described the weekend as the fruition of many years of meditation practice; earlier experiences and teachings he had been exposed to all came together. “When we were doing the investigation of appearances exercises, I felt that I could feel sensations from outside my body as well as inside it. So when the Acharya responded that the whole world is my body, it just split my mind open, I had a glimpse of how illusory the boundary is, and how vast the mind was.” He added that he was planning to find a way to integrate the Mahamudra practice into his usual practice, so as not to lose the new teachings.

It seemed that the very notion of boundaries was redefined that weekend. In one of the creative exercises, we brought outside objects, indeed the outside world, into the shrine room, and into our explorations and practice. We left the Centre, to walk around silently, enjoying the beautiful fall day, and brought in an object that spoke compellingly to us.

One participant described this walk as “magical.” Another said that she rarely permitted herself this indulgence of relaxed wandering. You could sense how much people opened up to the inherent richness and joy of the world through the creative exercises, working in tandem with our growing experiential understanding of the mahamudra vision.

We arranged these objects and “beloved” objects brought from home, into collective mandalas. The moving precision and elegance of some of these

object arrangements showed us how opening up, mahamudra style, might free and transform our life as well.

It's a few weeks since the workshop and I am still chewing on the rich and varied "cud" provided during this mind-blowing weekend! I feel that I am at a heightened level of awareness. Mark Frutkin, a teacher and practitioner at Shambhala Ottawa who proposed the final vote of thanks to our teachers, aptly summed up the gifts that the duo had brought us as "the stunning simplicity of the Mahamudra explorations with the profound richness of exploring the phenomenal world."

Recommended readings by Acharya Rockwell

« Mahamudra, Eliminating the Darkness of Ignorance, » by Wangchuk Dorje and Lamp of Mahamudra, Tsele Natsok Rangdrol (Shambhala Publications).