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Visualization in the Occult Sciences

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A Study of Meditation as Practical Action

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**Abstract** This paper explores a meditation practice that involves forms of visualization. It is a Theravādan practice that was researched ethnographically. The analytic focus of this report concerns the practical work of meditation. Meditative visualization is placed in the context of a broader literature on visualization practices. The paper commences with a comparative consideration of ‘Western’ and ‘Eastern’ approaches to mind. Meditation practice is introduced as a means of the meditator working with mind and learning from that experience. It is a controlled, purposeful, and imaginative exploration of states of consciousness. Visualization within meditation practice comprises a means of exploring certain meditative objects. A case study of a meditation practice that employs visualization is considered, and certain conclusions are drawn. In the overall conclusion, the results of this study of visualization in meditation are placed in the context of the broader literature on visualization.

Keywords: *visualization, meditation, Buddhism, phenomenology, ethnomethodology, samatha*

**Introduction**

The paper commences with a brief overview of the research methods employed and data collection. It then proceeds to fashion a comparative consideration of ‘Western’ and ‘Eastern’ philosophical approaches to mind, body, and consciousness. The ideas of Descartes are examined under the respective lens of phenomenology and the later Wittgenstein. Phenomenology and Wittgenstein are sensitive to the study of consciousness (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Significantly, each exhibits certain practical similarities to ideas in the ‘Eastern’ philosophies of Hinduism and Buddhism (Harvey, 1990). Buddhism has fashioned a practical, philosophically informed treatment of how mind works that includes at its centre meditation practice and the principle of learning by doing. Meditation practice is introduced as a device by which the practitioner works with mind and learns from that experience. In this sense the meditator’s knowledge of mind, their mind, is so until counter evidence is found.

Meditation practice offers a powerful and controlled means of working with a mental object to acquire some mastery over the frequently shifting mental content of consciousness. The paper then moves on to consider meditation from a ‘Western’ philosophical vantage as comprising a course of practical action. For Buddhist social philosophy, this is learning by doing. The Buddhist social philosophical point here is that the meditator should not accept doctrines about mind / consciousness without first subjecting them to close meditative inspection. Thus, acquiring competence in meditation is a practical activity.

The empirical focus of this paper is a southern Buddhist breathing meditation practice, Samatha. Samatha is most commonly undertaken in a sitting position, with the eyes lightly but fully closed. Closing the eyes serves the purpose of removing the visual field from consciousness. In Samatha, the practitioner experiences the senses, the body, and bodily conditions, the breath, ideas, mental objects, visual fields, and so forth. The meditator’s aim is to become conscious of the ongoing monitoring of the moment-to-moment nature of embodied existence. The acquisition of competence in meditation practice is a fundamentally practical accomplishment. This paper focuses largely on the first stage of Samatha meditation: working with and visualizing numbers. Buddhist scholarship employs concepts from within the languages of Pali and Sanskrit, which are ancient ‘dead’ languages from the Indian subcontinent (Harvey, 1990). In this paper, in the first instance when Pali and Sanskrit concepts are employed, a translation is offered and the concept is shown in italics.

The paper then moves on to compare the range of visualization required within Samatha meditation practice with developed themes from within the broader academic literature on visualization. Analytical directions from within phenomenology and ethnomethodology are employed in the study of meditation. The paper concludes with certain proposals for future research.

**Research Practice**

This research report is part of a broader corpus of publications (Ball, 2000). Its findings are an outcome of approximately 18 months of ethnographic fieldwork in Buddhist monastic contexts. While the data on which this report is based were collected from within a broader organizational context, this is not the topic of the current research. The empirical focus of this report is the detail of a course of practical action, a meditation practice that was acquired through pedagogic instruction. An exemplar of this style of research report is Sudnow’s analytic study of playing jazz piano (Ball & Smith, 2011; Sudnow, 1978). If Sudnow’s work can be characterized as focusing on how to make a piano produce the sounds of jazz from combinations of musical notes and patterns of sound, then this work focuses on something that is fundamentally more common place: working with numbers and combining them into sequences and patterns and visualizations.

This research explores a course of practical action that involves processes of visualization and displays how this process is newsworthy. It seeks a purposeful exploration of visualization within consciousness. Visualization is a means of exploring certain meditative objects. The empirical focus of this paper examines a structured context in which reflection and refinement of consciousness takes place through visualization. In common with Sudnow’s (1978) research, the consciousness of a course of practical social action is the analytic object of enquiry. An ethnographically discovered practice is analytically explored by reference to certain themes within the philosophy of mind employing an autoethnographic method. At the level of research practice, a record was maintained of the ‘inner’ experience/duration (consciousness) of a course of practical action: doing meditation practice. In this sense experience can serve as an ethnographic /autoethnographic object and a basis for documentary ethnographic inquiry and report writing (Anderson, 2006).

**Philosophical and Practical Approaches to Mind**

Consciousness is a fundamental attribute of being human. Being human is an accomplishment that is contingent upon processes of practical reasoning in a social world. We experience consciousness in the unfolding of time; we live time.

‘Western’ orientations to consciousness and related matters find a focus in the legacy of Descartes (1911/1967, 1641/1986). Husserl emphasized the sense in which consciousness is always directed, that consciousness is always consciousness of something (Smith et al., 2009). Mind always has a content or object (Husserl, 1970). The works of Wittgenstein are illuminating in so far as they are relevant for the study of consciousness and language. For Wittgenstein (1953), language is a fundamental mental content, a mode of representation for the experience of consciousness. As he suggests, ‘when I think in language, there aren’t “meanings” going through my mind in addition to the verbal expressions: the language itself is the vehicle of thought’ (p. 329). Through language and other practical symbolic devices, including visual images and visualization, we are able to communicate our experience of consciousness.

Buddhist and Hindu scholarship are examples of ‘Eastern’ approaches to mind that have a practical focus. They are grounded in the experience of working with mind in meditation, an exploration of how mind works (Harvey, 1990; Hinnells, 1985). The acquisition of competence in meditation practice is a practical accomplishment that is contingent upon a linguistically mediated pedagogic system and practical reasoning. Samatha meditation practice is a Theravādan-inspired practice. In its fundamentals, meditation is a part of what Eglin (1986) has termed the *corpus of occult sciences*. In Buddhism, meditation involves learning how to explore states of mind, working with meditative mental objects to modify consciousness. The task of meditation involves empirically based, concrete practical investigative work with meditative objects. Through the essentially practical courses of action that comprise meditation, the meditator can seek to work with, gain insight into, and even by degrees master aspects of consciousness. Mind is often regarded as fundamentally mercurial in character, but through meditation practice, working with mind in an organized systematic manner, the ‘just how’ of its functioning can be glimpsed. Aspects of mental processes can be understood more clearly. This comprises an evolving knowledge and practical competence.

Buddhist meditation practice offers the insight that all minds probably work in a fundamentally common natural biological manner. At a basic level, as beings with minds we are natural and biological, but through the employment of artfully and carefully fashioned cultural practices of meditation, we can embark upon understanding and transforming our mind. Through meditation practice, practitioners can seek to work with, gain insight into, and even by degrees master aspects of their consciousness of existence, which is registered in their mind. Elements from within this insight are employed in the following study of Samatha.

**Visualization: Some Disclaimers**

This paper presents a brief consideration of a meditation practice that involves forms of visualization. As has already been implied, a mind trained to work with the objects of meditation is a disciplined mind, a finely powerful mind. The sense in which visualization is employed in this paper, as a description of a controlled mind working with certain mental meditative objects, requires to be distinguished from other forms of mental activity, which may not be controlled in the same sense, for example, hearing voices in the head /mind, as can occur in certain types of mental disorders including schizophrenia (Leudar & Thomas, 2000). A different bur related example comprises significant personal transformative religious ‘experiences’, including visions and inner voices, such as the Protestant John Bunyan’s reported experience:

But the same day, as I was in the midst of a game of Cat, . . . wherefore leaving my Cat upon the ground, I looked up to heaven, and was as if I had with the eyes of my understanding, seen the Lord Jesus looking down upon me, as being very hotly displeased with me. (Bunyan 1666/1998, in Strachniewski & Pacheco, 1999, pp. 1, 9).

Hallucination is a related form of inner vision, as can occur with or without drugs and can adopt an aural, visual, or other sensory form, including feelings on the flesh and so forth (Slade & Bentall, 1988). Dreams provide a form of inner vision which most people experience, and there are a range of interpretations of their content, symbolism, and relation to the ‘subconscious’, mythology, etc. – an area of study popularized in the 20th century by Freud (1900/1955). In the context of meditation, it is notable that there exist practices for remembering/recalling the detail of dreams, such that competent practitioners have the ability to recall them as if they are replaying video tapes. There are also practices for controlling developments within the course of a dream, as it is dreamt. Such meditation practices are most common in the Tibetan Mahāyāna tradition of Buddhism with its Tantric roots (Hopkins, 1984; Waddell, 1972).

Daydreams or phantasies which are part of Schutz’s ‘multiple realities’ with their foundation in imagination bear some relationship to processes of *visualization* as the term is employed and developed in this paper (Schutz, 1962; Vaitkus, 2000). Daydreams/phantasies can involve eidetic practices and the manipulation of images in the mind. As Vaitkus following Gurwitsch suggests, states of mind which are based in phantasy can be linked into the phenomenological eidetic method, which involves ‘free variation in imagination’ concerning the exploration of some phenomena or other (Vaitkus, 2000, p. 48; see also Gurwitsch, 1964). Following on from Schutz’s (1962) analysis of ‘multiple realities’ and the subjective character of experience in the context of his treatment of phantasy, Vaitkus (2000) reminds us that for Schutz, ‘it would be more correct to say that one has “modified realities”, realities “as if” ’ (p. 51). This notion of ‘modified realities’, realities ‘as if’, serves as a useful departure point and characterization for meditative states involving purposefully controlled visualization.

**Forms of Visualization**

In the previous section, a comparative collection of types of mental activity and internal images were distinguished from those of meditative visualization. The distinguishing characteristic of meditative visualization was the level of control over the image or mental work. Control of the mental object of the meditation, as an ongoing contingent course of practical action, is the hallmark of this type of visualization. Constructing mental objects in the mind’s eye and working with them is a practical accomplishment involving finely organized, focused, and controlled work with memory and imagination. Minds trained to work with meditative objects are to varying degrees disciplined, concentrated, and focused on the task of purposefully manipulating internal images and the feel of consciousness of internal images. In this context, visualization serves as a descriptive gloss for directed and focused mental work with meditative objects, constructing and controlling internal images in the mind’s eye (Harvey, 1990).

Meditative visualizations have a basis in the employment of a fine-grained and detailed memory that arises from their grounding in an occult tradition of great antiquity. Memory is fundamental in assembling courses of practical action, including meditation practices. As Yates (1966), quoting Quintilian, reminds us about visualization as a foundation of the art of memory:

We require therefore places, either real or imaginary, and images or simulacra which must be invented. Images are as words by which we note the things we have to learn, so that as Cicero says, ‘we use places as wax and images as letters’. (p. 22)

The notion of simulacra is useful, in so far as this can serve as a description of the meditative journey, a reality ‘as if’ (Vaitkus, 2000, p. 51). It needs to be emphasized, however, that the Schutzian position of reality ‘as if’ is not an epistemological problem for Buddhist scholarship. Indeed, within Buddhist scholarship we engage with the external world at a very fundamental level through our consciousness of it, with our mind. From this vantage, the employment of meditative objects, working with imagination, a simulacrum is in some of its particulars analogous to say a physicist’s model of the cosmos, or the same physicist’s model of their university department, their family relationships, their preference for a certain type of food, person, or whatever – all are fundamentally anchored in the domain of ideas.

There is a cumulative academic literature which deals with practices of visualization within the natural and social sciences (Garfinkel, Lynch, & Livingston, 1981; Goodwin, 1994; Latour, 1986; Lynch, 1985, 1991). These studies are concerned with how courses of practical action serve to render work relevant objects understandable and visible, including optically discovered pulsars, sociological theories, instructed viewing in the courtroom, and the like. In such contexts, visualization serves as a practical description for how work objects are rendered visible, as images. In a study of police work and archaeological fieldwork, Goodwin (1994) has characterized this process as ‘professional vision’, as he has argued the matter: ‘All vision is perspectival and lodged within endogenous communities of practice. An archaeologist and a farmer see quite different phenomena in the same patch of dirt’ (p. 606). Visualization thus serves as a form of shorthand or gloss for a collection of practices for rendering an object accountable in the sense of it being intelligible and visible for presentational and other professional purposes. From the above examples, it is clear that processes of visualization are context, task, and work relevant and not homogeneous. Our empirical materials of visualization within meditation practice extend the phenomenon in the direction of the consciousness of meditative objects.

**Visualization in Meditation Practice: An Overview**

Within the various schools of Buddhism, there are a number of structural forms of meditation practice and variations on these forms. There are meditation practices which include visualization either as the principle meditative activity or as an optional component within a broader practice. For example, practices which involve focusing on the transitory impermanence of embodied existence tend to focus on existence in a body which ages and passes away, the physical body as an assembly of parts, etc., including one’s own body as it gradually and continuously transforms and changes through time. In time, young live bodies transmute into old dead ones. We live time and experience the ‘now you see it, now you don’t’ of our existence, matters which can be fashioned into meditative objects, including visualizations (Garfinkel, 1974, p. 16). The artful employment of imagination and concentration while working with particular meditative objects, transitory existence in a body, is a form of reality ‘as if’ (Vaitkus, 2000, p. 51).

A type of Theravādan meditation in which visualization is at one level optional is Samatha meditation, which is designed to encourage calm mental states to arise (Ball, 2000). In Tibetan Mahāyāna Buddhism with its Tantric influences, there are a number of practices which employ visualizations, including variants of kasina practices. For example, ‘pure land’ visualizations involve employing the setting sun as a mental object. Acquiring competence in the use of ‘the mind’s eye’, to concentrate on and hold an image of a setting sun, and to allow the mind to become gently but powerfully absorbed in working with the image, is an instance of a focused and directed mind, working with a mental object (Beyer, 1978; Harvey, 1990; Hopkins, 1984). Another Mahāyāna practice involves working with the images and deities depicted on a Thang-ka painting, visualization, internalization, and memory, which provide a palpable visual object to work with.

The sense in which acquiring competence in the above Buddhist meditation practices comprise a practical activity needs to be emphasized. Each of the practices is a form of situated pedagogic learning which is locally organized. The teacher-student relationship is a central structural arrangement for acquiring knowledge of Buddhist meditation. In part, these are the processes Garfinkel (1996) indexed when he referred to ‘the praxeological validity of instructed action’ (p. 9). Each of the practices introduced above with its meditative objects are acquired in pedagogic contexts which involve cultivating the powers of visualization and memory. In the remainder of this paper we explore one part of Samatha practice in more detail. Thai, a Samatha practice, can involve a significant element of visualization.

**Setting Up Samatha Meditation Practice**

The term *practice* serves as a form of shorthand for a structured corpus of knowledge which is transmitted as a pedagogic system. The meditator’s experience of practice is grounded in the practical empirical work of doing practice. The principle of discovering through practice and experience is fundamental to acquiring competence in various forms of Buddhist meditation, including the practices discussed in this paper. This shows how Buddhism is a fundamentally empirical tradition with occult foundations. Samatha is a breathing practice which is most commonly undertaken in a sitting position, with the eyes lightly but fully closed. Closing the eyes serves the purpose of removing the perceptual visual field from consciousness and direct empirical visual stimuli.

In Samatha, the practitioner experiences the senses, the body, and bodily conditions – the breath, ideas, eidetic visual fields and so forth. The meditator’s ongoing monitoring of the moment-to-moment nature of embodied existence is central. It is through media such as these that ways of the mind are accessed. In an overall sense, Samatha meditation can be characterized as comprising four major parts or phases, referred to respectively as counting, following, touching, and settling. Each of these major parts or elements within the practice is itself further subdivided into four subparts or categories of practice, termed respectively the longest, longer, shorter, and shortest. This results in an overall matrix pattern of four units by four units (see Figure 1). For practitioners, this matrix serves as a visual representation and shorthand for the overall parameters of Samatha meditation.

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Counting** | **Following** | **Touching** | **Settling** |
| **Longest** |  |  |  |  |
| **Longer** |  |  |  |  |
| **Shorter** |  |  |  |  |
| **Shortest** |  |  |  |  |

**Figure 1.** Working with numbers as meditative objects: The counting

Once internalized into memory, the matrix or versions thereof serve as a depiction of the structural arrangements and possibilities that the meditator can work with in their practice. They serve as the structural parameters for fashioning the particulars of this practice from within. For the accomplished meditator, the matrix represents the stages within a journey, a series of variable destinations, a mnemonic, and so forth. The component parts of the practice encompassed in the matrix are now explored as the experiential embodied accomplishment that is the practice. In this overview of Samatha practice, the emphasis is on the parts within it in which eidetic visualizations can be employed to powerful effect.

It is fundamental to the processual, pedagogically informed acquisition of practice that practitioners develop the skill to work with and recognize/visualize the overall pattern/matrix that Samatha is assembled from. For meditators, the matrix serves as an overview of the practices’ potential as a course of practical action, an embodied activity. With practice, meditators acquire competence in the assembly of their meditations, the ‘just how’ of this practice. Plainly, there is a situated order and procedural structure when assembling even the most mundane and concrete embodied elements of practical action, including setting up the sitting posture prior to practice. The detailed coordinated actions that exhibit a coherence and an embodied situated purpose, what Garfinkel (1991) has referred to as an aspect of the palpable haecceity of daily existence (p. 10). For the meditator, paying attention to the fine detail of the assembly of the meditation as a course of practical action is a matter of considerable significance. For the duration of the practice, mind is given centre stage. For this practical emphasis to succeed, it is crucial that the practice is set up with care and attention to fine detail, ensuring that the right conditions are established with minimum distractions and hindrances. As with all practical activities, meditation is grounded in the immediacy of the here and now. Our consideration of Samatha practice focuses largely on the stages within the counting and the settling which allow the possibility for extensive visualization, working with visual images fixed in the mind’s eye.

It needs to be made plain, however, that as a pedagogic system, the neophyte meditator learns the detail of the meditation pattern only over an extended time period. Frequently this involves approximately a year or so of weekly sessions. The neophyte would not be taught the total system at the start of their studies because core to its acquisition is learning by doing, learning by experience. The principle of learning by doing involves working with each stage of the practice as it is taught, sequentially, and ‘experimenting’ with its subtle modifications of consciousness.

Samatha is taught as an oral tradition, and neophytes are not presented with written descriptions of the practice such as the current academic paper. The neophyte will meet weekly in a beginners group. The teacher will give instructions for the meditation, and the students will carry them out. As part of this pedagogic system, neophytes will on a regular basis ‘report’ their experience acquired from ‘experimenting’ with the stages of practice to their teacher, and this will occasion a focused discussion. This is the embodiment of the Buddhist social philosophical point that the meditator should not accept doctrines about mind and consciousness without first subjecting them to close inspection in meditation, learning by doing. In this sense, acquiring competence in meditation is a practical activity.

The first stage of practice is termed the *longest of counting*. For the meditator, this involves establishing a balanced and sustainable body position, closing the eyes, and breathing the longest comfortable breath, an embodied course of practical action. For many people, the longest comfortable breath feels to expand the lungs and the upper abdomen. Being aware of/measuring the breath in this structured manner is a personal and intimate experience. Once the breath of the longest of counting is established, the meditator is instructed to breath in to the count of one up to nine, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, and out to the count of nine down to one, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1, a cathectic process. The counting is a mental act and has no verbal component, thinking the numbers. Some meditators, however, automatically also visualize the numbers, a matter considered in the following section. The longest of counting serves to provide the meditator with a uniform duration for the length of breath, a personalized if somewhat arbitrary measurement (Cicourel, 1964).

For the meditator, the practical purpose of this exercise is for them to establish a mental measure of their breath time, the embodied act of breathing. The longest of counting stage is the only stage which always occurs in every practice. The longest of counting always serves as a way into the meditation and also as a concluding stage before the normal breathing is recommenced. For the meditator it functions to demarcate breathing during meditation from the ‘normal’ breath, time spent in meditation from ‘normal’ time and so forth. In the stages of the counting phase of practice, the object is a sequential series of numbers. There is a palpable sense in which numbers take time to count, and reciting them mentally serves as an object and structure for the elapsing of temporal duration. When bound to the process of breathing, the mnemonic mental counting of numbers serves to structure the duration of the longest comfortable breath, working with numbers (Crump, 1990; Livingston, 1986).

Within the counting section of the practice, the next stage is termed the *longer of counting*. For this stage, the meditator employs a shorter length of breath than the longest of counting. In the longer of counting, the meditator is instructed to count between one and six on the in breath 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, and when breathing out to count from six to one, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1. The breaths of the longer of counting are proportionately shorter in duration and hence shallower than those of the longest of counting. In meditation practice, changing the length of breath in this manner effects a distinct modification to mind and body, which is available to the meditator to experience and ‘experiment’ with. Of fundamental organizational significance for each of the stages of the counting are sequentially ordered numbers.

The next stage of the practice is termed the *shorter of counting*. For the meditator, this involves breathing in to the count of one to three, 1, 2, 3, and breathing out to the count of three to one, 3, 2, 1. The length of the breath is shortened, proportionately halved from that of the longer of counting. By this stage of the practice, the meditator is acquiring some competence in working with progressively shorter lengths of breath. These effect distinct changes to mind and body, slowing both down. For meditators, shorter breaths are qualitatively distinct from longer ones, and the shorter of counting is the first taste within the practice of the subtle effects of short breaths on consciousness. The final step in the counting stages of the practice is termed the *shortest of counting*. This operates with an in breath of one, 1, and an out breath of one, 1. For the practitioner, by this stage of meditative experience, a fine and subtle control of breathing is in the process of development. The meditator has acquired some competence with controlled relatively short breaths, and a degree of ‘stillness’ is established.

For neophytes, Samatha practice tends to follow the principle of going out of the practice through the same stages it was entered by, retracing mental steps, working with the same objects on the way out as on the way in, but generally for shorter durations. The stages of the counting thus constitute a sequentially organized pattern, a pathway or route which involves carrying out four distinct mental exercises, at four designated locations, the longest, longer, shorter, and shortest. For the meditator, the respective stages of the practice are mental spaces analogous to rooms which are visited, worked within and then left behind. Working with the given mental object of the numbers amounts to the ‘just how’ of an embodied process, a process which enables the focusing, concentration, and refinement of mental energy.

**Visualizing Numbers in the Mind’s Eye**

For the duration of Samatha meditation, the eyes are kept gently closed. In the stages of the counting, the meditator’s visual field is thus open to the imaginative potential of numbers in the mind’s eye. When learning the longest of counting, it is common for the teacher to suggest that the neophyte consider visualizing the numbers as they move through the series, thereby working with this literal but imaginative potential. This might be considered an eidetic cognitive process in which the meditator views the numbers, in their mind’s eye. Eidetic processes are suggestive at one level of elements from within Wittgenstein’s Tractatus, his ‘picture theory of language’ (Wittgenstein, 1961). At another level, eidetic processes are fundamental to mind. Visualization from and within memory is a mental skill which is employed in numerous practical contexts as well as scholastic and occult traditions, and its development is of great antiquity. In a consideration of mnemotechnics, Yates (1966) informs us ‘in the ages before printing a trained memory was vitally important; and the manipulation of images in memory must always to some extent involve the psyche as a whole’ (p. ix).

The fundamental principle of visualization involves bringing a palpable object into consciousness and focusing the attention on it for a duration of time, working with imagination. For the meditator, to visualize the longest of counting involves seeing the numbers through an eidetic process in which 1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 - 6 - 7 - 8 - 9 structures the duration and pattern of the ‘in’ breath and 9 - 8 -7 - 6 - 5 - 4 - 3 - 2 - 1 serves for the “out” breath. In this mental work, visualizing the series involves mentally ‘seeing’ a number in turn and then letting it go, ‘seeing’ the next number and letting it go and so forth. To visualize the numbers in the longest of counting is to eidetically enhance the somewhat abstract nature of numbers, to give them a more palpable symbolic dimension within the work of the mind. In the context of Samatha meditation, for the practitioner, visualizing the numerical symbols employed in the longest of counting, doing imagination helps to focus the mind. Providing a concrete object to concentrate on carries out the foundational work necessary for the later stages of practice.

Within the four stages of the counting phase of the practice, sequential numbers are the objects which the mind focuses on. That is, consecutive numbers come to be regarded as mental objects and patterns. When carrying out the practical work of moving through a series of numbers, time automatically elapses. Following Schutz, Garfinkel is mindful of existence in time. Garfinkel characterizes duration as a ‘now you see it, now you don’t’ type of experience, courses of social and mental action in time (Garfinkel, 1974, p. 16; see also Husserl, 1970; Schutz, 1967). During the longest of counting stage of the meditation, when bringing to mind the number 1 whilst breathing in sequentially gives way to the number 2 and so forth through the series to 9. Each of the numbers arise, and then they are replaced with the next in the series, the ‘now you see it, now you don’t’ of practical reasoning. The precisely contingent nature of embodied time becomes evident within the counting stages of the meditation. As a meditative device for the practitioner, the counting operates by orienting to the discreet character of each of the numbers in the series as they are brought to mind in practice and then displaced sequentially. In this manner, the meditator uses the numbers to structure the duration of the in and out breath, which simultaneously serves as a shifting object to concentrate upon, changing numbers within a sequential series. Thus,

1-2-3-4-5-6-7-8-9, in breath, 9-8-7-6-5-4-3-2-1, out breath (longest)

1-2-3-4-5-6, in breath, 6-5-4-3-2-1, out breath (longer)

1-2-3, in breath, 3-2-1, out breath (shorter)

1, in breath, 1, out breath (shortest).

While working with the counting stages of the practice, the meditator attempts to balance the attention between the breath and the object, a sequential series of numbers, a pattern. For practitioners the meditation work carried out within the counting attempts to be neither too concentrated nor underconcentrated. The purpose here is to avoid other thoughts establishing themselves in the mind. A balance is achieved by skilfully applying a gentle attention to both the process of counting and breathing, the breath body. By the time the meditator has been taught the longest, longer, shorter, and shortest of counting, they have acquired some competence in focusing on the breath and employing patterns of numbers as the mental objects. For meditators, the numbers serve as a mnemonic and shifting location for the attention to go to, a process of visualizing numbers in the mind’s eye, working with symbolic patterns.

Of the four phases of the practice, the counting is the crudest mode of stilling the mind, crude but decidedly powerful. There are, however, good pedagogic reasons for employing numbers as objects in this early stage of practice, namely the commonplace everyday character of numbers enables the neophyte to stay with both the symbolic numerical object and the breath. As Yates (1966) informs us in a historical review of the occult foundations of *The Art of Memory*, ‘the classical sources seem to be describing inner techniques which depend on visual impressions of almost incredible intensity’ (p. 4). For the practitioner of Samatha meditation, numbers can take on this ‘incredible intensity’.

Each of the stages of the counting phase of Samatha meditation has been outlined, the longest, longer, shorter, and shortest. This pattern serves as the basic structural template for organizing each of the stages and phases of the practice which come after the counting, namely the following, touching, and settling. Thus, the relative lengths of breath employed in the longest, longer, shorter, and shortest stages of the counting also serve as temporal benchmarks for the breath in each of the subsequent parts of the practice, the following, touching and settling phases. These are phases within which counting by numbers does not take place. There are, however, good pedagogic reasons for employing numbers as objects in the early stages of practice, namely their common character enables the neophyte to stay with both the symbolic object and the breath, to visualize them as a sequential pattern.

**An Overview of Visualization Within the Following, Touching, and Settling Stages of the Practice**

In the stages that comprise the following phase of the practice, the rhythmic quality of the breath as it flows in and out of the body is explored and worked with as a meditative object. The meditator experiences how the body and mind are subtly but consequentially connected to and modified by the breath, a more subtle cathectic object than numbers that enables the unfolding and development of states of consciousness in time. An internalized sense of duration serves as the measure, a practical accomplishment in and of its self (Heidegger, 1962). Working with an inner awareness of duration is a contingent feature of numerous courses of practical action, working with the relationship of past, present, and future. In the visually displayed overview of the counting and following stages of practice below, the brackets ( ) serve as an indicator of duration for the stages of the following:

1-2-3-4-5-6-7-8-9, in breath, 9-8-7-6-5-4-3-2-1, out breath, Counting

( ), in breath, ( ), out breath, Following

1-2-3-4-5-6, in breath, 6-5-4-3-2-1, out breath, Counting

( ), in breath, ( ), out breath, Following

1-2-3, in breath, 3-2-1, out breath, Counting

( ), in breath, ( ), out breath, Following

1, in breath, 1, out breath, Counting

( ), in breath, ( ), out breath, Following

The stages of the following can thus be seen to mirror approximately their counting temporal or durational template. In the next stage of the meditation touching, mind uses a localized sensation experienced within the body as an object for the longest, longer, shorter, and shortest, again mirroring the durations depicted above. The attention is focused on a subtle awareness of the sensation which the breath makes at the end of the nostrils as it is sucked into the body. This tactile sensation becomes the meditative object, underlining the contingent embodiment of a practical activity. The touching thus offers the meditator an embodied practical glimpse of the intricacies of the mind-body relationship (Merleau-Ponty, 1964).

The final stage of the practice, the settling, is distinct from the counting, following, and touching, in that there is no predetermined or specified object for the meditator to focus upon. The meditator works with what comes into mind, although as a description of the process this is something of a superficial gloss. When a mind has been set up carefully by the counting, following, and touching, then not just ‘anything’ comes into it. The insight into the ways of the mind offered by the stages of the settling are for the practiced meditator an accomplishment, underpinned by a sound pedagogic system. The settling goes towards a focused and concentrated stillness of mind out of which can arise an image, but an image seen with eyes closed, through the mind’s eye. This is referred to in Buddhist scholarship as a nimitta (King, 1980). Nimittas can adopt various mental forms, ranging from an awareness of the general character of feelings to distinct fixed or shifting visual images, including colours, abstract shapes, they can resemble ‘things’ in nature such as the moon, stars, sun, etc. From this brief overview of Samatha practice, it is clear that visualization is most developed in the stages of the counting and settling phases of the practice.

**Conclusion**

This paper has added a further dimension to the expanding academic corpus on practices of visualization. Meditation practices offer a study in occult science that makes extensive if variable use of visualization. In Samatha meditation practice as considered above, numbers can be visualized and worked with in response to pedagogic instruction and visual nimittas developed. Within Tibetan Mahāyāna practice, the images and deities depicted on a Thang-ka painting can be visualized, internalized, and memorized, a palpable visual object to work with. Thang-ka images comprise significant components within a theoretically arranged, metaphysical corpus that offer students objects to work with. In the context of social theory, while Lynch (1991) convinces us that incorporated images are often superfluous to more fundamental linguistic descriptions, in the case of Buddhist meditation practice, visualization serves as a tried and tested pedagogic technique.

Under the tutelage of a meditation teacher, the detailed particulars of visual meditative objects can be manipulated with the student’s imagination, thereby fashioning the products of the singularly solitary work of practice, products that index meditative development. Such practices of visualization encompass something of what Lynch (1991) describes as ‘theory pictures [that] simulate a passage from a literary surface to a witnessable object or practical work space’ (p. 18). In terms of depicting an overview of Samatha practice, our pictorial exposition above serves to convert a verbal pedagogic ‘surface’ into ‘a witnessable object or practical work space’. Indeed, the spaces and stages of practice revealed by the four-by-four matrix/pattern seen in Figure 1 affords 16 distinct meditative objects/spaces to practice within – meditative locations to visit.

The principal distinguishing characteristic of the disciplined mental work of visualization-based meditation is located in the degree of control over the image and mental work. This is a purposeful manipulation of a meditative object, visualization as an ongoing course of practical action. Fashioning and working with visualizable meditative mental objects in consciousness is a fundamentally practical activity. It requires controlled delicate and precise cognitive work involving memory and imagination that gives rise to the practical accomplishments of visualization in meditation. Constructing and controlling internal images in the mind’s eye – and in the case of the settling phase of Samatha meditation, working with what comes into mind, nimittas – develops a mind that is trained to work with meditative objects. It is a mind that is disciplined, concentrated, and focused on the practical work of purposefully manipulating internal images and the states of consciousness they offer. Clearly this is a fertile area for further research.

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