

# VISUAL IMAGE IN MEDITATION

## INTRODUCTION

Visualisation is particularly associated with spiritual rebirth. Puja and Tong Len are spiritual rebirth practices that involve visualisation. It is also used as an approach in the metta bhavana.

But note that all the sections of the system of practice are *aspects* of practice. Any particular meditation may engage in any or all of the five aspects of the system. The association of particular meditations with particular aspects of the system is to be taken lightly.

Visualisation is an approach which can be applied in a range of practices.

There are different ways of engaging with visualisation in meditation. The way I will take is to see it as expressive of the movement from spiritual death to spiritual rebirth.

## SPIRITUAL REBIRTH ARISING FROM SPIRITUAL DEATH

Spiritual rebirth is the natural counterpart to spiritual death: seeing the absence of what does not exist, we go on to see the presence and the nature of what does

## KACCANA SUTTA

The world for the most part holds to a belief in existence or to a belief in non-existence

but for those who see the cessation of things as it really is, a belief in existence falls away

and for those who see the arising of things as it really is, a belief in non-existence falls away

The falling away of the belief in the existence of anything permanent or substantial is spiritual death

The appreciation of the nature of what does arise is spiritual rebirth: quite different from a nihilistic belief in non-existence

## CONDITIONALITY FORMULA

This being, that becomes

From the arising of this, that arises

This not being, that does not become

From the cessation of this, that ceases

With spiritual death: self-delusion (atma-moha) self-cherishing (atma-sneha) and self-pride (atma-mano) not being, self-view (atma-drishti) does not become.

When self-view drops away, one sees the nature of what **does** arise: that

Phenomena alone flow on, cause and component their condition

as Buddhagosha puts it.

## CONDITIONED EXPERIENCE

Once the wrong views of self and world fall away, what remains is the flow of conditioned experience. This is

- tangible, manifest, apparent, vividly present: yet
- ungraspable, insubstantial, ephemeral

## MIDDLE BEYOND EXTREMES

As Maitrya puts it in Middle Beyond Extremes (the Madyantavibhaga)

The unreal imagination exists  
 Duality does not exist within it  
 emptiness does exist within it  
 and it exists within emptiness

Spiritual death is the falling away of the belief in the duality of self and world which is not actually there in the flow of conditioned experience. What we imagine (self and world) is unreal, but the imagination (our capacity to perceive experience and to conceive of a world full of living beings) does exist.

Spiritual rebirth is seeing the nature (emptiness) of what does exist: this flow of conditioned experience which exists within emptiness.

## THE THREE SELF-NATURES

This is the Yogachara view of the three self-natures:

- The unreal imagination exists
  - but the duality of self and world which is imagined does not exist within it
- Conditioned experience exists
  - but not in the way that it appears to
- The perfected nature is the complete not-seeing of duality in conditioned experience

As Bhante puts it:

conditioned reality is still there. You're still eating and drinking and laughing and talking and seeing trees and houses but you're seeing them in a completely different way. On the one hand illusion is no longer present because self-centredness is no longer present ... so your perception is no longer distorted ... you're no longer seeing the conditioned as permanent and pleasurable and so on. You know you see it as impermanent and painful and all the rest of it. But as it were **behind** the relative reality, behind the conditioned or, as it were, shining through it because your perceptions have been cleansed, as Blake would say, you see the Unconditioned which at the same time is not a separate reality standing behind. Again language has its limitations.

## VISUALISATION PRACTICE

Visualisation practice is an expression of both the seeing through what is not there (spiritual death) and the seeing the nature of what is there (spiritual rebirth):

- we visualise the form as lucid, luminous, clear, apparent, manifest
- and as diaphanous, intangible, ungraspable, made of light

## KNOWING THAT ALL EXPERIENCE IS OF THIS NATURE

For example, holding a table: is anything grasped?

- The experience is of tactile physical sensation
- but one does not perceive directly any thing beyond the sense perception: there is no thing perceived: just perceptual sense-experience
- we only perceive surfaces: not the interior of a thing in itself: if there were such a thing, it would be imperceptible
- so my idea 'Table' is just that: an idea, a concept: and if that concept refers to anything beyond itself, that would have to be beyond concepts: inconceivable.
- So any thing-in-itself would have to be both imperceptible and inconceivable
- letting go of a belief in such things, we come back to our senses: to sense-perception as we experience it: apparent yet illusory in that it does not exist in the way that it seems to.

## VISUALISING THINGS AS THEY ARE

So in Visualisation we visualise things as they are:

- As illusory appearances:

as stars, a lamp, a fault of vision, dewdrops or a bubble, a dream, a lightning flash, a cloud

- Arising within awareness:

the primordial purity of the immaculate Dharmakaya  
within which all appearances arise like magical illusions  
these illusory appearances are the very nature of the Guru  
the inseparability of form and emptiness

## THE NATURE OF THE WAY THINGS ARE IS THE NATURE OF THE GURU

When we visualise, we bring to mind an illusory appearance, knowing that all experience arises as appearances which are illusory in that they do not exist in the way that they appear to.

Knowing also that this illusory appearance is also the nature of the Guru: of the Buddha or Bodhisattva figure visualised.

## A VISUALISATION

So we'll start a visualisation practice by bringing a broad open awareness to experience arising: recognizing everything we perceive is just a perception: an impression in sense-awareness.

Then from that space of presence, dropping in a description of an archetypal image of enlightened awareness: knowing this image – an illusory appearance – is of the same nature as all perception, and knowing that the Guru, Buddha or Bodhisattva is also of this nature: the inseparability of form and emptiness.

For this session, we will use a descriptive passage from the Flower Ornament Sutra in which the Bodhisattva Sudhana enters the tower of the adornments of Vairocana (the Buddha of the centre) which is to say he enters the realm of reality. The passage is both rich in imagery and also conveys directly the quality of appearances like magical illusions:

“You ask how a bodhisattva is to learn and carry out the practice of bodhisattvas. Go into this great tower containing the adornments of Vairocana and look - then you will know how to learn the practice of bodhisattvas, and what kind of virtues are perfected in those who learn this”

Then Sudhana respectfully circumambulated the bodhisattva Maitreya and said, “Please open the door of the tower, and I will enter” Then Maitreya went up to the door of the tower containing the adornments of Vairocana, and with his right hand snapped his fingers; the door of the tower opened, and Maitreya bade Sudhana to enter. Then Sudhana, in greatest wonder, went into the tower. As soon as he had entered, the door shut.

He saw the tower immensely vast and wide, hundreds of thousands of leagues wide, as measureless as the sky, as vast as all of space, adorned with countless attributes; countless canopies, banners, pennants, jewels, garlands of pearls and gems, moons and half moons, multicoloured streamers, jewel nets, gold nets, strings of jewels, jewels on golden threads, sweetly ringing bells and nets of chimes, flowers showering, celestial garlands and streamers, censers giving off fragrant fumes, showers of gold dust, networks of upper chambers, round windows, arches, turrets, mirrors, jewel figurines of women, jewel chips, pillars, clouds of precious clothes, jewel trees, jewel railings, jewelled pathways, jewelled awnings, various arrays of the floor, chambers of jewels, jewelled promenades, rows of golden banana trees, statues made of all kinds of jewels, images of bodhisattvas, singing birds, jewel lotuses, lotus ponds, jewel stairways, ground of masses of various jewels, radiant gems, arrays of all kinds of jewels. Also, inside the great tower he saw hundreds of thousands of other towers similarly arrayed; he saw those towers as infinitely vast as space, evenly arrayed in all directions, yet these towers were not mixed up with one another, being each mutually distinct, while appearing reflected in each an every object of all the other towers.

Then Sudhana, seeing this miraculous manifestation of the inconceivable realm of the great tower containing the adornments of Vairocana, was flooded with joy and bliss; his mind was cleared of all conceptions and freed from all obstructions. Stripped of all delusion, he became clairvoyant without distortion, and could hear all sounds with unimpeded mindfulness. He was freed from all scattering of attention, and his intellect followed the unobstructed eye of liberation. With physical tranquillity, seeing all objects without hindrance, by the power of production everywhere he bowed in all directions with his whole body.

The moment he bowed, by the power of Maitreya, Sudhana perceived himself in all of those towers; and in all those towers he saw various diverse inconceivable miraculous scenes.