

EVERYDAY MEDITATION

Visual Thinking

“In a way, nobody sees a flower, really, it is so small, we haven’t the time—and to see takes time, like to have a friend takes time.” – Georgia O’Keefe

“We don’t see things as they are, we see things as we are.” – Anais Nin

Seeing is Forgetting the Name of the Thing One Sees – Title of Lawrence Weschler’s biography of artist Robert Irwin

"Blind to the mind's true nature, we hold fast to our thoughts, which are nothing but manifestations of that nature. This freezes awareness into solid concepts, such as I and other, desirable and detestable, and plenty of others...If you know how to leave your thoughts free to dissolve by themselves as they arise, they will cross your mind as a bird crosses the sky—without leaving any trace."

– Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche

IMAGE SPACE (Shinzen Young)

For most people, the visual component of the thinking process involves mental pictures associated with memories, planning, and fantasy. These mental images *tend* to appear in front of or behind the eyes.

Sources Of Mental Imagery

- A. Proactive visual thinking. Intentional or spontaneous remembering, fantasizing, planning, and ruminating. This is the most common source of mental images.
- B. Reactive visual thinking. Images arising in reaction to or in anticipation of events. These images, combined with reactive verbal thinking and reactive physical and emotional sensations in the body, generate the impression of a “self” that perceives and is separate from the objects of perception.
 - a. Images arising in reaction to external sound.
 - i. Object images. These include mental pictures of an object producing sound such as a bird, car, airplane, person talking, or dulcimer. These images are usually clear and located where the object actually resides in the surrounding physical space.
 - ii. Spatial images. These include images of direction or a broader region of space from where the sound is coming from.
 - b. Images arising in reaction to internal talk.
 - i. Images related to the topic of the talk.
 - ii. Images of imagined audience, listener, or an image of yourself.

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- c. Images arising in reaction to *Touch Activity*.
 - i. Mental images of the specific locations within the body or the whole body where physical sensations are perceived.
 - ii. Visual impressions of movement or flow patterns related to the physical sensations.
 - d. Images arising in reaction to *Feel Activity*.
 - i. Mental pictures of the specific locations within the body or the whole body where emotional-flavored sensations are felt.
 - ii. Visual impressions of movement or flow patterns related to the emotional-flavored sensations.
- C. Orientation images. Mental images of one's body and immediate surroundings that arise either spontaneously or stimulated by sound and other external stimuli when the eyes are closed. These images constantly remind us of who we are and where we are.

Phenomena Related To But Distinct From Mental Imagery

When we monitor mental images, we attempt to highlight the activity related to visual thinking and try to allow the activity associated with other visual phenomena to remain in the background of our awareness. These phenomena include:

1. External vision – Ordinary seeing of material objects through the open eyes.
2. Remnant external light – the light that comes through your closed eyelids. This is usually perceived as a mixture of brightness, gray, darkness, or color related to the capillary blood in the eyelids. For most people, this remnant external light is perceived in the same location as *Image Space* and can become a source of confusion.
3. Psuedo-light – Swirling arabesques of color, geometric patterns, floaters, etc.

Why be mindful of mental imagery?

Paying attention to mental images with equanimity can be a powerful and productive experience.

- **Knowing oneself.** Conscious and unconscious body images are a major component in the perception of self. Clarifying and unblocking their natural flow leads to (1) freedom *from personal identification* and (2) freedom *of personal expression*.
- **Knowing the world.** The vast subconscious storehouse of one's remembered images is subject to incessant and inappropriate fixation. This is one cause of the rock-solid perception that we live in a world of separate material objects as opposed to a sense of "oneness" described by philosophers, poets, artists, and contemplatives.

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- **Processing stress and trauma.** A major component in stress and trauma is the persistence of images related to events. It is often productive to work with these images *as images* in addition to working with the associated feelings and self-talk. The deepest catharsis comes when the images, feelings, and self-talk all simultaneously melt as soon as they arise.
- **Insight into the thinking process.** Your life might be without high levels of stress and you may not be particularly interested in self-inquiry or transcending the world. But it is likely that you sometimes get caught up in scattered, uncontrollable, or inappropriate thinking. A little knowledge and a few skills concerning imagery can be of great value here.

The Principle of Divide and Conquer

A phenomenon can't overwhelm you as long as you can divide it into manageable parts.

By separating thought into two parts, we are able to divide its gripping power. A hundred-pound rock represents a crushing weight. Two fifty-pound weights can be handled, although this still requires effort.

The principle of divide and conquer can be applied to any type of sensory experience and at every scale of sensory structure. Of course the word “conquer” is being used somewhat loosely and metaphorically. We certainly are not attempting to conquer thought itself (or any other sensory phenomenon for that matter). What gets conquered are the drivenness, congealing, and unconsciousness that affect thought and are responsible for it being perceived as a problem.

When we begin to conquer these, we begin to conquer internal suffering and the inappropriate behaviors that result from internal suffering.

To Waiting

You spend so much of your time
 expecting to become
 someone else
 always someone
 different to whom a moment
 whatever moment it may be
 at last has come
 and who has been
 met and transformed
 into no longer being you
 and so has forgotten you

meanwhile in your life
 you hardly notice

the world around you
 lights changing
 sirens dying along the buildings
 your eyes intent
 on a sight you do not see yet
 not yet there
 as long as you
 are only yourself

with whom as you
 recall you were
 never happy
 to be left alone for long

W.E. Merwin, from *Present Company*

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EXERCISES

Exercises for Developing Sensitivity to Mental Imagery

The following exercises, if practiced regularly for a period of time, will help you develop sensitivity to the images associated with the thinking process.

1. Working with present reality imagery
 - a. Close your eyes for a moment and settle into your posture.
 - b. Open your eyes and look at your surroundings on all sides. Right, left, front, up, down, back, then look at your own body.
 - c. Close your eyes again and focus on whatever visual impression of your surroundings may be present. Also be aware of your body outline/image.
 - d. Focus all your attention on this present reality imagery of self and surrounding scene no matter how vague or vivid the impressions may be.
 - e. Notice how images of the surroundings may be triggered by external sounds.
 - f. Notice how images of the self/body may be triggered by body sensations.

2. Evoking memory-based images
 - a. Intentionally recall a person from the near or distant past. Focus on the memory of that person until it completely vanishes. Try to detect the moment that it vanishes, if possible. Repeat the exercise (with the same person or a different person) as many times as you would like.
 - b. Intentionally recall a place from the distant past. Focus on the memory image of that place until it completely vanishes. Try to detect the moment that it vanishes, if possible. Repeat the exercise (with the same place or a different place) as many times as you would like.
 - c. Intentionally recall a physical object from the near or distant past. Focus on the memory image of that object until it completely vanishes. Try to detect the moment that it vanishes, if possible. Repeat the exercise (with the same physical object or a different one) as many times as you would like.

3. Evoking future-based images
 - a. Intentionally think of a person you will be seeing in the near or distant future. Focus on the future image of that person until it completely vanishes. Try to detect the moment that it vanishes, if possible. Repeat the exercise (with the same person or a different person) as many times as you would like.
 - b. Intentionally think of a place you will be seeing in the near or distant future. Focus on the future image of that place until it completely vanishes. Try to detect the moment that it vanishes, if possible. Repeat the exercise (with the same place or a different place) as many times as you would like.
 - c. Intentionally think of a physical object you will be seeing in the near or distant future. Focus on the future image of that object until it completely vanishes. Try to detect the moment that it vanishes, if possible. Repeat the exercise (with the same physical object or a different one) as many times as you would like.

4. Using emotionally charged images
 - a. Intentionally think of a person, place, or object that has a strong negative emotional association (that is, makes you feel angry, frustrated, sad, hurt, embarrassed, etc.). To the best of your ability, ignore the uncomfortable feelings (body sensations) and mental talk this image may evoke (let them remain in the background). Focus on the image as being nothing more than a mental picture—just a pattern of light on your inner screen. Stay with the image until it vanishes, however long that takes. Be aware of the “impermanence” of the image, how it may shift or stabilize before it vanishes.
 - b. Intentionally think of a person, place, or object that has a strong positive emotional association (that is, makes you feel love, joy, excitement, amusement, humor, etc.). To the best of your ability, ignore the pleasant feelings (body sensations) and mental talk this image may evoke (let them remain in the background). Focus on the image as being nothing more than a mental picture—just a pattern of light on your inner screen. Stay with the image until it vanishes, however long that takes. Be aware of the “impermanence” of the image, how it may shift or stabilize before it vanishes.
5. Using special situations. Certain situations tend to induce mental images in the thinking process. Focusing on imagery when you find yourself in these situations can help sensitize you to this component of your thought process.
6. Here are some examples:
 - a. In general, any new or unfamiliar environment. Close your eyes (even for just a few seconds) and notice how your mind tries to orient you to the situation through visuospatial imagery.
 - b. Environments where there are lots of people. Close your eyes at a party or at the airport.
 - c. Emotionally charged situations. (It may be difficult to close your eyes because the urge to see is so strong.)
 - d. Listen to TV shows or movies with your eyes closed. Notice how your mind creates the video portion.
 - e. Imagery is often vivid when you are sleepy or in the zone between waking and sleeping (hypnagogic imagery). Notice the dream images that linger in your mind for a moment before getting out of bed in the morning.

Noting Internal Images Associate with the Thinking Process (Shinzen Young)

1. **Settle in.** The first thing to observe when you begin a formal meditation practice is the sense of your body physically settling into your posture. Lengthen the spine as you inhale, and observe any sensations associated with relaxation on as you exhale. Take a couple of minutes to enjoy this. Establish a balance between a state of alertness and repose.
2. **Chose a domain.** The sensory domains include physical-type sensations in the body, emotional-type sensations in the body, mental images, and internal conversations.

In this technique we will be focusing on mental images. We will refer to this area as Image Space. Image Space *tends* to be located in front of and behind the eyes.

3. **Position your attention.** Position your attention in Image Space. Take a minute to feel satisfied that you are well positioned in this domain.
4. **Start noting.** The Basic States to note in Image Space are Image and Blank.

Image

Images can be clearly active (this does not mean that they are necessarily bright or vivid, only that the content is clearly defined) or subtly active (hazy, visual processing is occurring, but the content is not clearly defined).

The label for activity in Image Space is “Image.”

Blank

No conscious awareness of any visual component in thought.

The label for restful states in Image Space is “Blank.”

5. **Establish a rhythm.** Focus on that state for a few seconds, letting your attention soak into it to the best of your ability. After a few seconds, note again, either the same state or a different one.
6. **What doesn't matter?** It doesn't matter whether you mostly note activity or mostly note rest or cover them both relatively equally. It doesn't matter whether you are always noting the same images or if the images are continually changing.
7. **What does matter?** Stay in Image Space. If you get pulled into Touch, Feel, Talk, Sight, or Sound Space, gently return to Image Space. When you note a restful state, let it pull you into equanimity and consistently concentrate on that flavor of rest. When you notice an active state, bring equanimity to it and let your awareness soak into it.

Friendship Meditation (from Sharon Salzberg)

Once we have established a sense of warmth and compassion and have had a chance to extend these feelings toward our teachers, mentors, family, friends, and loved one, we can use this momentum to begin broadening the scope of our empathy.

Observe what arises in your body and mind when you wish these core human desires for the neutral people in your life (the person who makes your coffee, the person who delivers your mail, the person driving the bus or taxi, the person taking your money, the person on the phone you will likely never meet in person).

Observe what arises in your body and mind as you wish these core human desires for the difficult people in your life.

May the neutral/difficult person be safe.
May the neutral/difficult person be happy.
May the neutral/difficult person be healthy.
May the neutral/difficult person find some ease in my life as it is.

“Do not do to others what you would not have them do to you.” – Hillel the Elder

“But I say to you, love your enemies. Pray for those who hurt you.” – Sermon on the Mount, The Gospel of Matthew, Chapter 5

"Your task is not to seek for love, but merely to seek and find all the barriers within yourself that you have built against it." – Rumi

HOMEWORK

1. Fifteen to twenty minutes of formal practice each day using the technique of your choice.
2. Give one activity each day your full attention.
3. STOP* before starting your car (waiting for a bus, leaving the house to take a walk).
 - Stop.
 - Take a minute to make contact with Image Space.
 - Observe the mental images triggered by the drive you are about to take.
 - Proceed.