

46 Meditation and Imagination

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Rather than simply exploring what imagination is, or providing a taxonomy of imagination, meditation manuals and their philosophical accounts describe a different domain of imagination: identifying imagination as one of the mental faculties that needs to be cultivated and trained with an underlying premise that imaginal acculturation has an enormous role to play in the subject's mental health and his¹ interaction with the society. Unfortunately, extant philosophical investigations of imagination in light of yogic and tantric materials has been overshadowed by the text-historical and scientific approaches, with the first focusing on the emergence of practice and its sociocultural boundaries, and the latter focusing on meditation and its relation to health. Historically, issues such as imagination or emotion have been neglected topics even in Western intellectual discourse. Classical texts written in Sanskrit come in contrasting flavors, with both positive and negative depictions of imagination. While a romantic understanding of imagination is vivid in literature and aesthetics, philosophical texts attribute a dubious role to imagination, with *kalpanā* (imagination) consistently being depicted, whether in Hindu or Buddhist philosophical texts, as a hindrance for recognizing reality or for veridical perception (Timalisina, 2013). In this latter presentation, *kalpanā* is equated with the monstrous power of *māyā* or illusion that projects the world that is not even there, and traps beings in their delirious slumber. This trend is changing, though, with new studies bringing to discourse the constructive role of imagination, particularly in contemplative practices.² Visualization, primarily by means of playing with images, appears to dominate substantial space in the literature of meditation, and it also appears that since classical times, imagination has been identified by philosophers as a faculty to explore the nature of consciousness. Rather than these practices seeking to draw a line between fantasy and reality, they appear to use fantasy in order to reconstitute commonsense reality. This paper explores the extent to which these practices envision those possibilities. At the same time, this paper also identifies a conceptual framework for pursuing such an investigation. I engage with contemporary theories of imagination in order to contextualize some of the archaic practices of imagination and the justifications behind such practices.

Meditation practice, any form of contemplative exercise among different cultures oriented toward altered mental and/or psychosomatic states, involves a substantial amount of imagination in its course. The insights derived from such practices can help

1 This chapter uses “he” and “his” throughout, but the author intends “she” and “her” as well.

2 For example, see Crangle (1994), Hayes (2006, 2013), Shulman (2012), and Timalisina (2005, 2006, 2015a, 2015b, 2017).

us ground the ways in which imagination and creativity have been understood across cultures. In particular, it can open up a space for conversation across disciplines on the overlap between conceptualizing imagination and linking imagination with other modes of consciousness such as memory or perception, or with the potency of consciousness such as in the context of creativity. With a focus on excerpts from two tantric philosophers, Abhinavagupta (eleventh century), and Maheśvarānanda (fourteenth century), I demonstrate on the one hand how a productive role is given to imagination, and on the other how the practices harnessed in contemplation aim to ultimately transform the subject's assessment and response to lived events. This essay in essence explores how interacting creatively with fantastic images can be used as a device to reconstitute not only the subject's self-assessment or the way a subject recognizes himself and his role in his community, but also the way he reacts to natural stimuli. These excerpts and the philosophical corpus that interprets them share a voice regarding the overlap between playing with images, the role simple imagination or *kalpanā* has in creativity (*pratibhā*), and the role imagination plays in grounding human creativity. The interplay between the fantastic and the real, one of the recurring themes of Abhinavagupta's philosophy, also deserves special attention, as his is not the philosophy of subjective idealism, and at the same time, he also rejects the vertical split between the mental and the physical. By exploring the taxonomy of imagination in his literature, I also intend to make some connections with the ways imagination has been explained in our own times. In particular, Abhinavagupta is exemplary for his use of imagination as a mechanism to understand his philosophy, one that allows subjects to transform their horizon of consciousness by means of some fantastic games that he uses for deconstructing the predisposed order of conceptualization. Before initiating a global dialogue upon imagination by offering Abhinavagupta's philosophical exposition upon esoteric experiences that are sometimes given in liturgical fashion, I would like to begin the conversation on the structures of consciousness by analyzing examples of Abhinavagupta's use of imagination in transforming reality and elevating awareness.

Maheśvarānanda's text falls under the same philosophical paradigm. I am using his case for extending the scope of imagination in daily ritual practice. Unique to Maheśvarānanda is the maṇḍala ritual that anticipates a transformed somatosensory experience. Imagination in this account is not directed toward the past, which would therefore constitute some form of episodic memory that is heavily constructed and edited by the faculty of imagination; neither is this directed toward the future in simple play with fantastic images. Ritual imagination is directed here toward the present moment, unleashing imagination to creatively fill in the mode of experience. Here, imagination stands alone as the luminous power of consciousness, able both to reflexively gaze upon its own modifications and to curb and manipulate distinctive states in order to edit and control the horizons of experience.

Abhinavagupta's Ritual Fantasy

The visualizations outlined by Abhinavagupta are derived from the manuals on Goddess worship, with the most prominent practice connecting the triadic deities

identified as Parā, Parāparā, and Aparā with three different modes of consciousness in its most introverted, extroverted, and intermediate grounds. tantric visualization practices – whether they are focused on any of the deities, their maṇḍalas, or the specific mantras – or this specific practice focused on the triadic goddesses all seek to internalize the external rituals by replacing real objects with mental imagery or, in other words, replacing corporeal processes with exercise of the vital force (*prāṇa*) and mental acts of blending imagery. The course of practice involves deciphering metaphors, making metonymic connections, and shifting from one image to the other – all of which culminate in transforming the subject's experience of himself and his surroundings.

Abhinavagupta outlines this particular course of visualization as follows (Shastri, 1918: 199–200):

[The aspirant] should first imagine the unity of the vital force, consciousness, and the body since there is no need for the acts of [ritual] bathing etc., as [he] has been purified merely by having rested in complete bliss [the conceptual state that envelops all modes of conceptualization]. And because pure consciousness is of the character of absolute subjectivity (*paramaśiva*) . . . he should [mentally] tie the [metaphoric] tuft of consciousness in the form of the mind and the vital force by a mere visualization (lit. articulation, *uccāra*) [of absolute subjectivity] so that [the mind,] tied to absolute subjectivity (*paramaśiva*), does not wander around. Having pierced through the complex of sensory faculties that depend on the mind, [he] should transform the ritual objects, [the ritual] site, and the directional bases in front [of him] into pure consciousness {*tat*}. [He] should [mentally] fill and worship the libation pot with the same permeation [used in the process] of bonding the tuft [by visualizing pure consciousness enveloping the objects]. He should [then mentally] worship the altar with drops of pure consciousness {*tat*}, and worship and libate the circle of mantras within the body complex with the fluid of pure consciousness {*tad*} by connecting the left ring finger with the thumb [to control the breath]. And then [he] should imagine his seat [first] to the extent of breath, and then in the altar, shaped as a trident and culminating with three potencies [constituting transcendence, transcendence while immanent, and immanence, by means of Parā, Parāparā, and Aparā]. [He] should imagine [his] seat extending up to the category of *māyā* [the limiting factor that gives rise to subjectivity and externality] with [the visualization of] the phoneme “*sa*,” and extending up to the three potencies [or Goddesses] while [visualizing] the phoneme “*au*.” In the order of {*evam*} the categories up to *māyā* located within the phoneme “*sa*,” culminating with three potencies in the phoneme of “*au*,” and the potency in the form of reflexive consciousness (*vimarśa*) that is to be worshipped as located on top of the triad {*tad*}, [the aspirant] should [mentally] install the foundation and what is founded upon it by a single articulation [of the phoneme “*sauh*”]. After completing [this course], [the aspirant] should visualize the world located within consciousness that has been objectified, and also [visualize] that this [world] is comprised of consciousness. In this way there is a circumscription (*samputa*) of the world by consciousness and of consciousness by the world. It is because the world emerges from consciousness and dissolves back into it, and because consciousness emerges from the objects to be cognized and [the world] rests there as well, the essence of consciousness having these modalities (*etāvattva*) is gained by means of a twofold circumscription.³

3 *tatra snānādikartavyatānapeṣayaiva pūrṇānandaviśrāntyaiva labdhaśuddhiḥ prathamam prāṇasaṃviddehaikībhāvam bhāvayitvā saṃvidas ca paramaśivarūpatvāt . . . saṃvidagneḥ sikhām*

The passage cited above needs some unpacking, particularly in light of our discussion on imagination. First of all, there is a rich play with images, as every ritual object, the deities being worshipped, and the mechanism or the process of ritual, are all fantasies. In this hour-long visualization, a real ritual with external objects, a real altar with trident and lotuses drawn upon it, with deities situated in each tine of the trident, each with a lotus as their base, and the supreme divinity, all are replaced with mental images. Breath and select phonemes are used as the signposts in this ritual substitution of external objects with the imagined objects. The aspirant's own bodily assessment, his central nervous system, and his sensory faculties are accordingly supplanted by the projected imagery. The sequence of mental substitution culminates with the external world being subsumed within consciousness: The world of everyday experience compresses to yet another layer of imagery. The complex categories (thirty-six categories within this system) are all replaced with the imagery selectively envisioned and successively dissolved into the higher categories. The deities invoked in the *maṇḍala* such as Parā, Parāparā, and Aparā, and the supreme Śiva with his consort Śakti, are all merged within pure consciousness. By reducing the external world to mental images and those to pure consciousness, and by eventually seeing an identity between the world and consciousness, the aspirant discovers his identity with pure consciousness, and at the same time his oneness with the world. At this juncture, the subject wakes up with his altered personality: He no longer experiences himself as fragmented and separate from the rest of the reality but as one and woven within the system that constitutes his being in the world, identical the recurring and concurring events. In this transformed experience, the world is not "out there," but within himself, with the phenomenal subject discovering his identity with the absolute subjectivity, the supreme Śiva.

Next, the vocabulary Abhinavagupta uses in the mechanism of visualization is worth considering: "having formed or shaped" *bhāvayitvā* (the causative of becoming, in the sense of constructing something), "having articulated" (*uccārya*), "should perform" (*kuryāt*), "should remake" (*kuryāt*), "should imagine" (*kalpayet*), and "should visualize" (*paśyet*). All these terms are used here as interchangeable, as they are all prescribing the course of visualization, either in the context of creating the imagery or in manipulating the images. The imagining captures both the objects and the subject: Mental objects are to be shaped according to the external objects so that the externals can be replaced, and the subject is first supposed to engage in a ritual act, and eventually transform his subjective horizon. Moreover, in Abhinavagupta's language, real construction with words such as *bhāvanā* are

buddhiprāṇarūpāṃ sakṛduccāramātreṇaiva baddhāṃ kuryāt — yena paramaśiva eva pratibaddhā tadvyatiriktaṃ na kīñcid abhidhāvati, tathāvidhabuddhadhiṣṭhita-karaṇacakrānuvedhena purovartino yāgadravayagrhadigādhārādīn api tanmayībhūtān kuryāt | tato 'rghapātram api śikhābandhavayāptyaiva pūrayet pūjayet ca | tadvipruḍbhīḥ stanḍilāny api tadrasena vāmānāmāṅguṣṭhayogād dehacakraṣu mantracakraṃ pūjayet tarpayet ca, tataḥ prāñāntas tataḥ sthīṇḍile trīśūlāmakam śaktitrayāntam āsanam kalpayet, māyāntam hi sārṇa aukāre ca śaktitrayāntam āsanam kalpayet | māyāntam hi sārṇa aukāre ca śaktitrayāntam tadupari yājyā vimarśarūpā śaktiḥ — ity evaṃ sakṛduccāreṇaivādhārādheyanyāsam kṛtvā tatraivādheyabhūtāyām api saṃvidi viśvaṃ paśyet | tad api ca saṃvinmayam ity evaṃ viśvasya saṃvidā tena ca tasyāḥ saṃpuṭībhāvo bhavati saṃvidā uditam tatraiva paryavasitam yataḥ viśvaṃ, vedyāc ca saṃvid udeti tatraiva ca viśrāmyati — iti etāvattvaṃ saṃvittattvaṃ saṃpuṭībhāvadvayāl labhyate | Tantrasāra of Abhinavagupta, see Shastri (1918, Chapter 22, 199–200). The translation is mine.

interchangeably used with fantasy consciousness, *kalpanā*. Even the word for veridical perception, *paśyati*, is blurred, by it being used for visualization. Abhinavagupta's is a monistic philosophy of *saṃvid*, consciousness. Although the term is translated as consciousness, this is not what it means in common English usage, as the term refers to pre-subjective/objective potential for being conscious of something. Abhinavagupta views this as the core for the emergence of subjectivity and objective reality. And, interestingly, he finds teleology to be guided by imagination, as it is by means of fantasy that he explores the possibility of encountering reality. In this meditation, not only can fantasy replace the real-world materials, but Abhinavagupta also implies that fantasy consciousness can reshape our biologically and culturally conditioned parameters of experiencing reality and help us return to the ground of pure consciousness that has not yet expressed itself in terms of the inner and outer, real and fantastic, and the sacred and profane. This is not a mere fantasy, though. For Abhinavagupta, imagination enjoys the absolute power to reconstitute reality, to deconstruct the habit patterns or psychosomatic predispositions (*saṃskāra*), by means of which the subject can not only alter his experience in response to the external stimuli, but can also reshape his own self-assessment. This thesis is further buttressed if we explore the terminology where Abhinavagupta identifies the creative force embedded with being identical with reflexive consciousness, with terms such as creativity (*pratibhā*) being used as synonymous with fantasy (*kalpanā*).

Maheśvarānanda on Ritual Visualization

The following paragraph sums up the visualization practice within the Kaula system that considers engagement with the world and bodily enjoyment as essential to self-awareness. In the passage cited below, we find a meticulous sequence of imagining that constitutes the body of the ritual, with what is projected eventually replacing what is real. Just as in the case of Abhinavagupta's visualization, this also aims toward transforming the external ritual domain with the mental objects and uses philosophy as a mechanism to establish correlations. According to Maheśvarānanda (see Dvivedi 1992, verses 42–47),

Visualization [lit. observation (*nibhālana*)] is a reflection upon one's own potency, and this is very rare in the world. Liquor, betel leaves, fragrance, and flowers are easily accessed to offer to the divine. Regulating breath implies the suspension of [the mind and the sensory faculties from] the engagement [with the externals] (*vṛttānta*), even when the expansive forces (*vibhava*) that are oriented towards action are held motionless in order to reflexively cognize the essential being of oneself. [The ritual act of] desiccation is removing the polluting factors (*mala*), and [the ritual act of] burning [negative karma] is cutting off the predispositions. Soaking the body [ritual bathing] is the purification carried out with an immersion into the nectar of wisdom. Harnessing the body is reflecting upon the collection of conceptual constructs as empty of constructions. Libation is engaging with the objects of cognition. The entities that nourish the self-nature are the flowers. The complete libation of the bodily drops (*kulabindu*) purified with the marking of the

mantras is the offering of the sprouts of all the mental constructions into the source of complete I-consciousness. Whatever is the mental state (*bhāva*) of [meditating subject], that alone is his divinity. Deity images grant whatever is desired if they are visualized [by the subject that has] the identical mental states.⁴

In this highly cryptic passage, Maheśvarānanda has outlined that every single aspect of tantric ritual worship can be transformed into sustained visualization. In so doing, he borrows inputs from two different domains: Śākta liturgies and Trika and Pratyabhijñā philosophies.⁵ Imagination plays multiple roles in this process:

- (1) Project a ritual even in its physical absence.
- (2) Substitute the projected ritual with the corresponding mental objects for each of the components of the ritual.
- (3) Cultivate an altered state of consciousness by subverting what is given and use philosophy for this justification.
- (4) Transforming subjective awareness, wherein the yogin imagines himself to be the absolute, the totality of beings and things.
- (5) Bring this projected consciousness back into conventional reality and act appropriately in the social sphere with this transformed gaze.

The passage requires further unpacking. Kaula rituals are comprised of four basic elements: following the rules, having the appropriate mental state, preparing the required substances for food and drink for the deities, and making the specific gestures as the means to invoke the deities while making the offerings. Among these constituents, Maheśvarānanda views the second, the mental state, as primary, and he identifies the ritual as a process wherein the aspirant transforms his own mental state to recognize his true identity.⁶ One of the preparatory steps toward the ritual worship is the regulation of breath, which is generally conducted with recitation of specific phonemes. Instead, Maheśvarānanda recommends this to be the step of gazing upon the emerging stage of sensory engagement, tapping them even before the imagined objects are fully manifest in the mind in order to complement the external objects. The aspirant in this stage directs his attention toward the imagined

4 *nijabalanibhālanam eva varivasyā sā ca durlabhā loke |
sulabhāni viśvapater āsavatāmbūlagandhapuṣpāṇi ||
vimraṣṭuṃ nijasattvaṃ vibhave kāryonmukhe stimate 'pi |
bāhyavṛttāntānām bhaṅgaḥ prāṇasya saṃyamo jñeyah ||
śoṣo malasya nāśo dāha etasya vāsanocchedah |
āplāvanam tanūnām jñānasudhāsekanimitā śuddhiḥ ||
avikalpatayā marśo vikalpavargasyāṅgasannāhaḥ |
arghyaṃ vedyavilāsaḥ puṣpāṇi svabhāvapṣakā bhāvāḥ ||
pūrṇāhantāyā mukhe viśvavikalpāṅkurāṇām vikṣepam |
mantrollekhaviśuddham pūrṇam kulabindutarpanam bhaṅamah ||
yo yasya bhāvayogas tasya khalu sa eva devatā bhavati |
tadbhāvabharitā abhilaṣitam tathā phalanti pratimāḥ || Mahārthamañjarī, verses 42–47.*

The translation of these passages in the body is mine.

5 I have extensively addressed the literature and philosophy of tantric visualization in Timalsina 2015a and Timalsina 2015b.

6 *tasmāt svasvarūpaparāmarśa eva paramā pūjā | Parimala upon MM 42.*

objects that are used in this ritual worship. What Maheśvarānanda is demanding is not to preclude the emergence of objectivity, or to dwell in some thought-free state, but rather to gaze upon thoughts as they emerge from the core of being. At the same time, Maheśvarānanda anticipates that the subject is not swept aside by the tide of thoughts but is able to regulate them by allowing only the assigned imageries to come to the screen of the mind. Accordingly, mental projection replaces the purificatory rites and the mantric gaze allows the subject to accept his newly emerged form that is free from impurities. This transformation is a catalyst for the subject's rediscovery of himself as the higher subjectivity enveloping the totality. Specific corporeal gestures are used in tantric rites for installation of particular mantras in different corporeal limbs. Maheśvarānanda exploits this act by metaphorically projecting this to the reflexive consciousness expunged of all forms of mental constructions. At the same time, he is also endorsing the engagement with the objects of consciousness and cultivating the sense of contentment as a reward. tantric rituals demand the offering of various substances. He sums up this offering in terms of dissolving the emerging thoughts into pure consciousness where the gaze, having suspended the process of the emergence of thought, returns to its origins and reaches the state without any conceptual turmoil. He outlines his philosophy in the last verse in this sequence (MM, verse 47), where the deity being worshipped is identified as the particular mental state of the aspirant.

In this monistic paradigm, there is no deity other than the very consciousness manifest in distinctive emotional states and conceptual conditions. After all, it is the subject's mental state that matters in determining his engagement with the world. This is what Maheśvarānanda means by materialization. In other words, the subject's mental states can be ritually altered and this transformation can directly affect our socially constructed reality. Maheśvarānanda is giving power to imagination in this reframing of the reality, making it the ultimate tool for achieving absolute freedom. Ritual, for him, is therefore a sustained practice of imagination: In his philosophy, the self and his world are created by the habits and mental conditions of the very subject. The subject, accordingly, is always free to alter the conditioning factors, and rituals are directed toward cultivating the power of imagination.

Interface between Meditation and Imagination

From the tantric perspective, the above exercises are not "fantasies" in the literal sense, as the aspirant would not say, "let me imagine," or "let me fantasize." However, the texts do repeatedly use the terms that translate in English with acts related to imagination (*bhāvayet*, *kalpayet*, *cintayet*, *dhyāyet*, etc.). At the same time, the texts mix up the process with terms that relate to the acts linked with memory (*smaret*, *anusmaraṇa*). In practice, a big part of visualization does borrow inputs from memory. The foremost challenge for us is the taxonomy of imagination, identifying where these types of imagination would fit, if they even qualify to be categorized as such. Indeed, not all the cognitive activities involved in the above visualizations do qualify as acts of imagination. Some of them are beliefs (I am Śiva

or Bhairava [an aspect of the god], consciousness permeates the world, etc.). Others are desires or wishes (physical cleanliness without bathing, ritual offering without substances, etc.). In all accounts, it is consistent that the types of imagination we have at hand are distinct from daydreaming, as these imaginings have a distinctive goal; there is a consistent meta-gaze upon what has been fantasized; there is a regulation of the entities that are allowed to be imagined, etc.

Moreover, the above two examples of visualization from Abhinavagupta and Maheśvarānanda demonstrate multiple types of imagination at play:

- (1) Projecting the objects of libation, for instance, is imagining things that are spatiotemporally real.
- (2) Merging into the fluid of consciousness is not spatiotemporally possible.
- (3) There is a clear play of the ability to form beliefs about objects, for instance, that the objects of experience are manifestations of consciousness.
- (4) This involves the ability to evaluate things in an altered domain, such as experiencing oneself as circumscribing the totality.
- (5) The course of visualization aims to reconstitute the subjective state, and actualize a transformed vision of oneself, including one's role in a wider community.

While these varieties of imagination resemble to some extent the ones outlined by Stevenson (2003) and Abraham (2016), I am modifying the taxonomy of imagination based on the above two ritual accounts:

- (1) Playing with images: In propositional form, this type of imagination always has directionality; it is always intentional. The ritualized imagination borrows all forms of mental imagery; there are objects to see, smell, touch, taste, and hear.
- (2) Sensory imagination: Rather than playing with images, this type of imagination involves a sensory presence; subjects report having some sort of sensory experience of the imagined object. For example, in the ritualized imagination, rather than imagining the phonemes, the subject hears those phonemes being articulated in his heart. In the screen of his mind, the subject in the imagined ritual sphere sees himself engaged in *maṇḍala* worship. This is akin to the moment of orgasmic union with what is being fantasized, where the subject actually experiences the amorous embrace of his partner.
- (3) Imagining things as imagined as such vs. imagining them as real: In some cases, subjects report imagining things while imagining, and their mode of consciousness is actively imagining while the content is given as the content of imagination. In other instances, subjects are interpreting the contents as experienced but they are in fact fantasizing those objects.
- (4) Guided vs. spontaneous imagination: We involuntarily imagine things and events. However, we can also direct our minds toward imagining an intended course of events. Ritualized imagination is a key example for guided imagination.
- (5) Synthetic imagination: Different inputs from multiple domains are simultaneously imagined.
- (6) Episodic imagination: Subjects can imagine encountering deities (or ghosts for that matter) and summon them, forming an episodic memory. On other

- occasions, the entire complex (presentation and representation, giving presence in the form of images and remembering these images) can be a simultaneous act.
- (7) Transformative imagination: With a complex play of images, with a sustained act of guided imagination, and by means of recreating episodic memory-type of imagination, the subject becomes transformed, with his subjective assessment and his response to the objective world being altered. The subject actually experiences the instances of fantasy as real events from the past.

As is evident from the list above, I am reading imagination as a gradually progressing ability, a potency, and for this reason, it cannot be categorized based on its contents alone. It is not possible for those who are not accustomed to guided imagination to suspend other cognitive modes and engage in pure imagination for a prolonged period. The final anticipated outcome of this sustained course of imagination is a total transformation of the somatosensory and mental response to the stimuli. Based on the intensity of visualization, subjects are capable of sustaining their altered state of experience for a varying duration of time. The ultimate goal of these practices is to deconstruct the existing modes of constructed experience that have both the biological and sociocultural underpinning. However, not all imaginations can lead to the same liberated state of consciousness, and some courses of imaginations can have a negative side-effect. Tantric texts are particularly wary of the misuse of visualization and recommend readers to undertake such practices only with the supervision of a highly trained mentor. When the transformation by means of visualization is firm and the subjects are capable of shifting their focus at will from ordinary consciousness to the realm of fantasy and back to everyday experience, they acquire a new gaze and a transformed vision of bliss. Aspirants report this as a liberating experience as it gives them a sense of freedom from both biological and social constraints. All in all, the act that begins as imagining culminates with creating, with a singular goal of subjective transformation. Subjects also report as a consequence being able to mirror others' conditions, empathize with others' pain, or altruistically act upon others' suffering. Based on these accounts, imagination is one of the cognitive faculties that can be cultivated and transformed.

In her introduction to *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Imagination*, Amy Kind (2016: 4) identifies that some imaginations are prompted by initial suggestions. The type of imagination I have discussed in this chapter do borrow prompts from a real-life ritual paradigm. She also makes a distinction between voluntary and involuntary forms of imagining. While all forms of visualization are voluntary, an urge for an involuntary presence of the fantasy objects underlies the subjects' aspiration to "directly encounter" the deity or enter into the visualized mental space. Accordingly, tantric visualizations demonstrate both the presence and absence of the props: In some instances there are props such as the body of the aspirant visualized as the maṇḍala while in other instances subjects simply visualize the intended object. Kind also identifies "collaboration" as an additional factor. In our context, if the ritual visualization involves masses, visualization may involve collaboration. However, tantric visualizations are predominantly practiced in isolation and are hardly collaborative. The final identifying factor in Kind's taxonomy

involves “forms,” that some imaginations have a propositional structure (subjects imagine that A is B) while in other instances they lack a propositional attitude (subjects simply imagine A). The examples of visualization identified above demonstrate both the tendencies. When subjects dive deeper in their fantasy zone, they seem to have less of a propositional attitude and their subjective horizon seems to be gradually occupied by the field of visualization. In congruence with Kind’s thesis that some imaginations borrow “props,” various imaginations prescribed in the course of visualization borrow supports, for instance by using phonemes to guide the flow of vital energies so that it gradually surges upward in the body. In her taxonomy, Kind does not address sustained forms of imagination. The conversation on visualization in this chapter can fill this lacuna. In a prolonged ritualized visualization, for instance in various forms of guided meditation and in altered states of consciousness, subjects not only cultivate intended forms of experiences, they also surrender their subjective consciousness, with them reporting being “empty” (*śūnya*) or being expunged of their subjectivity. Sustained imagination is supported in the course of visualization by means of the ritual manuals that are often memorized by the aspirants and used in their course of visualization. Yet another distinction needs to be made: What occurs during the mode of imagination is not just imagination. While tantric aspirants are predominantly imagining in the course of visualization, they are also borrowing imagery from their memory while at the same time remaining actively aware of their immediate presence. These subjects, while brooded in their fantasy zone, are constantly integrating aspects from their memory while also attentively gazing upon their own present modes of consciousness. Also noteworthy are the circumstances when we are in the mode of imagination and all that occurs is not just imagination. It is an active mode of consciousness and, in addition to the act of imagining, we are also playing with images borrowed from our memory, are perceptively aware of the surroundings, are using sensory stimuli as a component to enhance our imagination, and are combining our beliefs and thoughts in the act of imagination.

Central elements in this progression toward complex acts of imagination involve playing with different inputs while exercising different cognitive faculties. Metaphoric thinking, metonymic linking of two domains, and cognitive blending of the inputs from two or more sources are ubiquitous in both the exercises outlined above. Select metaphors can explain the role metaphor plays in the course of visualization: CONSCIOUSNESS IS FLUID (drops of consciousness), BLISS IS A SEAT (resting on a blissful state of mind), CONSCIOUSNESS IS A THREAD (to tie the tuft of consciousness), SUBJECT IS SPEECH (articulation of absolute subjectivity), COGNITION IS PIERCING INTO OBJECTS (penetrate the sensory faculties, as if the act of reversing the gaze of consciousness is a physical process that actually pierces through the sensory complex), PHILOSOPHICAL CATEGORIES ARE THE SEATS (making a seat atop *māyā*, sitting on top of the triad that signify volition, cognition, and action), MENTAL ACTS ARE PHYSICAL ACTS (mental energy to sustain visualization for a prolonged period of time is identified as vigor), HAPPINESS IS BLOSSOMING (the mind blossoms when visualization reaches to higher states), etc. In fact, the very fabric of tantric language is woven with

metaphors, with a surplus of meaning, something additional imparted by means of general speech (Timalsina 2007).

The final insights that can be derived from this conversation relate to images: Are instances of imagination always accompanied by images? Philosophers such as Descartes or Hume maintained that for any mental episode to be considered as imagination, it needs to be accompanied by images.⁷ There are some serious objections to the claim that every episode of imagination is necessarily accompanied by mental images (Gregory, 2016). Imagining negative facts, for instance, cannot be supported by the presence of any images. This objection anticipates the premise that the image that is present in the mind corresponds to or is the very content of imagination. The course of visualization has something else to offer. When we entertain negative facts, for example, “David did not attend the conference,” or “Round squares are nonexistent,” what is presumed according to the objection is that there is a content of imagination that corresponds to what we are imagining. However, even in imagining the negative facts, we can be occupied with images: a person, a circle, or a square. There is no correspondence required between what we fantasize and what is present in our mind during the mode of imagination. While negating, we can still have the presence of the object in our mind. And whether in affirmation or in negation, the object can be partially present. When we miss someone, we are mentally presenting the person. Therefore, it is wrong to assume that negative facts have no images in the mode of imagination. What is missing in the above argument is that the presence of images does not constitute imagination. My argument is that it is not the thing (content) but the act itself that constitutes imagination. As has been said earlier, not everything that happens in the mode of imagination is actually an act of imagination, and just like other cognitive modes, imagining is yet another mode that is saturated with distinctive cognitive faculties. In the above examples, most of the components that constitute visualization contain images. However, there is no image to correspond to the affective roles, such as the devotional attitude toward the deity. Emotional states based on imagined objects can overpower the subjects, giving a semblance of emotion. It is noteworthy that there is a clear distinction between the state and the object. Accordingly, there is also no imagery possible for the absolute, pure bliss, or concepts such as infinity, eternity, and so on. Finally, multiple aspects of visualization invoke the formless, the very texts repeatedly address that what is being visualized is devoid of images, and so it is counterintuitive to impose images in these accounts.

The intricate connection of image with imagination also has a linguistic aspect. If we return to the Sanskrit language, acts of imagination are derived from the verbs $\sqrt{kṛpu}$, the root for *kalpayati*, which means both “imagines” and “creates.” The words derived from it do not intrinsically say anything about images, unlike the English term “imagination.” If we extend the scope further, no word used in describing visualization makes images necessary: Most of the words in this application are derived from \sqrt{dhyai} = to think, the causative use of $\sqrt{bhū}$ = to be, in the sense of “to make it happen,” $\sqrt{smṛ}$ = to remember, or \sqrt{cint} = to think. Apparently, the

7 For further discussion of mental imagery in the context of imagination, see Gregory, 2016, 97–110.

discussion of whether thoughts are like images (for example, Fodor 1975, Kosslyn 1980) or like description (for example, Dennett 1978, Pylyshyn 1978) never made headway in discussing the culture that is suffused with images. Arguably, this was due to their primary focus on utilizing the potentials of imagination in transforming everyday experience rather than defining it. This lacuna has left the ground open for discussion, as the texts that describe visualization do use images but also stress that images are applicable only in the initial steps. The manuals on visualization use propositional attitudes in addressing imagination, while at the same time seeking to ground the experience that is expunged of both the subjective and objective horizons. The literature on meditation repeatedly stresses that the reality we share is a construction, whether collective or personal and is always subject to alteration.

What Can Meditation Reveal about Imagination?

Meditation practices come in many forms. Some cause the practitioner to recognize his bodily and cognitive limitations by means of forcing him to see with the eyes of his mind what he tends to generally block, forget, or pretend is not there, like an awareness of his own mortality. Others suspend all forms of conceptualization, giving the subject a much-needed pause from sustained episodes of imagination. What I have highlighted in this chapter is a different type of meditation that utilizes imagination in an exploration of its parameters by providing multiple modalities, for instance, emotional and conceptual contents to sustain a course of imagination. The meditation practices outlined above use imagination as a tool or a mechanism to alter our everyday perception, to enhance some of our experiences, to ground the subject in the midst of other subjects, and to create a new intersubjective domain. This all stems from the breach between the mental and physical that is underscored in all forms of contemplative practices.

All our cognitive faculties, including daydreaming, counterfactual imagining, and empathic response, appear to have a real biological and social role. Further studies on these areas may guide us in unravelling the domains of imagination and their relation to transforming negative emotions. Meditative practices appear to focus on the subject's self-assessment. Any transformation in personality demands that the person reflect or develop a meta-gaze to evaluate himself among other selves and things. While the course of meditation repeatedly seeks to alter the subjective domain, the extent to which this interacts with the socially and biologically cultivated personality is yet to be analyzed. In the above examples of visualization, philosophy appears as a tool to deconstruct the given horizon of somatosensory experiences and a mechanism to transform subjectivity. Philosophy, in this light, is therapeutic and transformative, rather than descriptive or analytical. The issues that need further investigation involve the role contemplative practices play in subjective transformation and in creating empathic beings. How our belief systems affect imagination and personality is yet another issue. Accordingly, whether these sustained acts of imagination can help individuals in recognizing their place in the collectively shared social reality is also an issue for further study.

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