

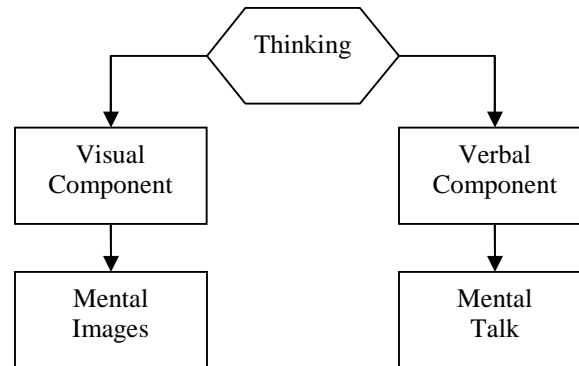
Working with Mental Images

Introduction: Basic Concepts and Definitions

Terminology

Working with mental images presents us with two challenges. The first is to get a clear idea of what does and does not constitute a mental image. The second is to get a clear idea of what it means to “work” with them — what we hope to achieve and how we should go about achieving it. So, let’s begin by defining some basic terminology.

MENTAL IMAGE: As defined here, the term mental image (or just image) refers to the visual component of thought. It contrasts with (mental) talk which is defined as the verbal component of thought. Thus,



Some synonyms for mental image(s):

- Imagery
- Internal image(s)
- Eidetic thinking
- *Eidesis*
- *Phantasmus*
- Mental pictures
- The mind’s eye

Some examples of mental image(s):

- A remembered face
- A fantasized scene
- The mind’s eye picture of a passing airplane or a chirping bird
- The outline of your body as visually perceived when your eyes are closed

- The planned form of your redecorated kitchen
- The sense of your physical surroundings as perceived when your eyes are closed

These are examples of images because they are all visual and they all represent facets of the thinking process (memory, planning, fantasy, judgment, will, association, self-awareness, etc.)

On the other hand, when your eyes are closed, swirling clouds of color, geometric patterns, floating sparks, and the chiaroscuro of grays caused by external light coming through your eyelids, do not represent images as defined here. This is because, although they are internal and visual in nature, they are not a direct part of the thinking process *per se*.

Concerning image as defined here, two points are of cardinal importance.

1. The word image should not be taken to imply that the mental picture is necessarily vivid or photo-like. Imagery is often quite hazy, semi-transparent, impressionistic and fleeting.
2. Many people are not consciously aware of any imagery at all, even when they look for it. That's perfectly okay. On the other hand, it's almost certain that everyone thinks in pictures at least subliminally through the subconscious visual association circuits in the brain. Thus, training sensitivity to the image faculty may dramatically enhance one's self-clarity and self-integration.

WORK WITH IMAGES: As defined here, to work with images means to bring mindfulness and equanimity to the image function, i.e. to increase its intrinsic clarity and lessen its internal viscosity. For other approaches to working with imagery, see section Angels and Insights. Bringing mindfulness to imagery will sometimes be referred to as “monitoring” or “tracking” on “noting” images.

ACTIVITY LEVEL OF IMAGERY: Mental imagery can be monitored in many ways. For example, one could characterize each image as it arises according to its content (memory, plan, fantasy...) or its source (sound-triggered, body-triggered...). Personally I prefer to characterize imagery in terms of its “general level of activity.”

At any moment the conscious image function may be:

1. Clearly active — You know that a specific image is present. N.B. in this case “clear” does not necessarily mean bright or vivid. It merely means that its content is clearly defined.
2. Subtly active — Any state of visual thinking between “clearly active” and “inactive.” “Subtle” refers to:
 - a. Preconscious stirring at image home base. A continuous undercurrent of visual subliminal associative processing - tenuous, fugacious and massively parallel. “Eidetic white noise.”
 - b. Images that are very hazy. One may or may not have some idea of their content.
3. Inactive — No conscious awareness of any visual component in thought. “Eidetic rest.”

IMAGE HOME BASE: The location in space where images (especially memory, planning and fantasy images) usually appear. For most people this is somewhere in front of or behind their closed eyes. Some people have more than one such location depending on the type of imagery (i.e., memory vs. hypnagogic, etc.).

In order to establish continuous contact with one's imaging function, it may be useful to rest attention at the image home base. Bear in mind, however, that...

1. Image home base may expand or contract in size, or shift in location
2. Images may arise anywhere in space, that is, in any direction and at any distance. The image of a car passing your house will probably be projected in front of your house. The image of your foot will probably be projected where your foot is. The image of the room around you may be projected...
 - a. Just in front of you
 - b. In front and to both sides
 - c. In front, to both sides and behind (panoramic projection)
 - d. In front, to both sides, behind, above and below (spherical projection)

Thus, image home base is merely a convenient place to rest attention when monitoring imagery. One must be willing to let the direction of one's attention shift to wherever images arise within space.

MENTAL SCREEN: A synonym for image home base.

EIDETIC: An adjective meaning “relating to visual mental processing” (from the Greek *eidesis* meaning “to think in pictures”). This term is ultimately derivable from the Proto Indo-European root *weid* meaning “to know through seeing.” The English words *video* and *wit* derive from the same root as well as the Sanskrit words *Veda* and *vedana*.

VISUALIZATION, VISUALIZING, IMAGING: These terms often (though not invariably) connote intentional creation of images to achieve a specific goal.

Phenomena Related to but Distinct from Mental Imagery

When we monitor mental images, we attempt to highlight the neural circuits related to visual thinking and background the neural circuits associated with other visual phenomena. Among these other phenomena are...

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 and perhaps some pink due to capillary blood in the eyelids. For most people, remnant external light is perceived in the same location as image home base; this may become a source of confusion.
3. Pseudo-light — Swirling arabesques of color (the proverbial purple cloud), geometric or kaleidoscopic patterns, floaters, etc.

Sources of Mental Imagery

The following provides a convenient overview of mental imagery types and sources. Although outlined here as a hierarchical “tree,” many of these categories overlap. My goal here is to cover the possibilities, not necessarily to partition them.

Images Arising During Normal States

PROACTIVE VISUAL THINKING: Intentional or spontaneous remembering, fantasizing, planning, considering, etc. This is by far the most common source of overt mental images. Imaging of this sort tends to be located “in front,” i.e., on a “mental screen” before or behind the eyes.

REACTIVE VISUAL THINKING: Images arising in reaction to or in anticipation of events in specific sense gates. These, when combined with reactive verbal thinking and reactive subjective feeling, produce the impression of a “percipient self,” i.e., a self that perceives and is separate from the objects of perception.

1. Images Arising in Reaction to External Sound
 - a. Object Images (a mental picture of an object producing sound, such as a bird, car, airplane, person talking, etc.) These images are usually clear and located where the object actually resides in surrounding physical space.
 - b. Spatial Images (an image of direction or region of space whence the sound comes.)
2. Images Arising in Reaction to Internal Talk
 - a. Images related to the topic of the talk, usually in front.
 - b. Images of imagined audience, listener or interlocutor for your internal conversation and/or of yourself talking.
3. Images Arising in Reaction to “Touches”
 - a. Mental pictures of the whole body or specific location(s) in the body where a touch sensation is received.
 - b. Mental pictures of energy/flow patterns of the sensation.
4. Images Arising in Reaction to “Feelings”
 - a. Mental pictures of the whole body or specific location(s) in body where emotional feeling is perceived.
 - b. Mental pictures of energy/flow patterns of the sensation.

ORIENTATION IMAGES: Mental pictures of one’s body and one’s surroundings that arise, either spontaneously or are stimulated by sound or touch when our eyes are closed. These images constantly remind us of who we are and where we are. As these become 1) clarified and 2) liquefied, we begin to feel less embedded in a particular situation.

Cathartic Imagery

IMAGES ARISING FROM THE UNCONSCIOUS as part of spontaneous or induced psychological catharsis (emotional release)

1. Historical – Images of actual events
2. Imagined – Real but not actual
3. Archetypal – Mythic but emotionally significant

Images Arising from Altered States

ALTERED PHYSIOLOGY

1. Hypnagogic Imagery
2. Dream Imagery
3. Sensory Deprivation Imagery
4. Substance Related Imagery
 - a. Arising during intoxication
 - b. Arising during detoxification
5. Images Caused by Physical Stresses
 - a. Hunger / thirst
 - b. Sleep deprivation
 - c. Exposure to heat / cold
 - d. Pain / illness
 - e. Various other stresses

ALTERED PSYCHOLOGY

1. Healthy – Spiritual visions
2. Unhealthy – Hallucinations associated with psychoses and so forth

Motivation: Why Be Mindful of Mental Imagery?

Equanimous monitoring of mental images can be a powerful and productive experience. Here are some reasons why.

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*
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 - "ten thousand things" as opposed to "one spirit essence."

As we work with conscious and semiconscious images, some "photons" of clarity and equanimity seep down into that utterly unconscious "world storehouse." Its contents begin to melt as soon as they move. This leads to a new perceptual paradigm. Particulate objects can also be experienced as interactive undulations. The aggregate of these undulations is the "world

as one wave.” In terms of the history of Western philosophy, this provides a natural link between Heraclitus (“All is change”) and Parmenides (“All is one.”)

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 mind-talk.

The deepest catharsis comes when the images, feelings and the self-talk all simultaneously melt as soon as they arise.

Getting a Handle on the Thinking Process

Of course your life may be without too much stress and you may not be particularly interested in self inquiry or transcending the world. But it is highly probable 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 main point is that what is vaguely referred to as “thinking” often consists of two components: verbal and eidetic. These components can usually be separated both qualitatively (auditory vs. visual) and spatially (before my eyes vs. in my head).

So how does the ability to distinguish these components help us be less driven and fixated in our thought processes? The answer goes to the very essence of the “miracle of mindfulness.” I call it the principle of “Divide and Conquer.”

Principle of Divide and Conquer

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

By separating thought into two parts, we divide its gripping power. A hundred-pound rock represents a crushing weight. Two fifty-pound rocks can be handled, albeit with effort.

This divide and conquer principle can be applied to any type of sensory experience and at every scale of sensory structure. Of course the word “conquer” is being used here somewhat loosely and metaphorically. We certainly are not trying to conquer thought itself (or any other sensory phenomenon for that matter). What gets conquered is the drivenness, congealing and unconsciousness that affect thought and are responsible for it being perceived as a problem. *When we conquer these we conquer internal suffering and the inappropriate behaviors that result from internal suffering.*

That’s the theory. What follows next is one way to implement it in practice.

Method: How to Be Mindful of Mental Imagery

Description of the Method

STEP 1 — Rest your attention at image home base, but also be aware of images that may be projected elsewhere in space.

STEP 2 — Monitor the general level of image activity in terms of three mutually exclusive possibilities:

1. Clearly active
2. Subtly active
3. Inactive

By monitor I mean sample the image function every few seconds and determine which of the above best characterizes what is happening there. Try not to have preferences among the possibilities and remember it's okay to guess if you are not sure. If you wish to note these states with mental labels, you can use the following terms.

1. “clear”
2. “subtle”
3. “none”

At some point you may become aware that an underlying subtle level of activity continues even while clear images are present. In that case there are, strictly speaking, four mutually exclusive possibilities.

1. “clear”
2. “subtle”
3. “clear and subtle”
4. “none”

STEP 3 — If clear dominates, go to Step 4 below. If subtle seems to call, go to Step 5. If there are few or no images, go to Step 6.

STEP 4 — With regard to each occurrence of a clear image, be aware which of the following mutually exclusive possibilities takes place.

1. The image disappears as soon as it arises.
2. The image persists but changes (albeit perhaps very slightly) as you are observing it. Possible ways of changing include the following.
 - a. Its outline shifts
 - b. Parts fade in and out
 - c. It moves with life-like qualities (i.e., it's like a movie or animated cartoon rather than like a static photo)
 - d. It “morphs” (continuously transforms from one shape to another)
3. The image just sits there without change, like a static photo.

These possibilities broadly classify the “modes of impermanence” for clear mental images.

Detecting and accepting impermanence is an important facet of mindfulness work.

Impermanence (*anicca*) is defined as the magnitude and direction of change in the object being observed. By this definition category, (3) above is a mode of impermanence. It represents a change of zero magnitude and no direction (just as 0 is considered one of the speeds on a car's

speedometer). Allowing an image to simply sit there statically for as long or as short as it wishes is an important facet of “eidetic equanimity.”

If you want you can label the three modes of impermanence for each individual image as it occurs.

1. “Clear: gone”
2. “Clear: change, change...”
3. “Clear: stable, stable...”

Of course situation 2 and 3 cannot go on forever. Eventually one has:

- “Clear: change, change...gone” or
 “Clear: stable, stable...gone” or
 “Clear: stable, stable...change, change...gone”

The specific content of one’s mental imagery is as complex as one’s known world, but its basic “contour” or flow pattern can be completely characterized with merely five categories.

1. Clear image that remains stable for a while
2. Clear image that changes moment by moment
3. Clear image that immediately vanishes
4. Subtle image activity
5. No image activity

The trick is to simply keep track of these possibilities without a preference between them.

If images tend to disappear as soon as they arise, let them. If they arise and disappear in rapid succession, get into sync with that metronomic rhythm. If the images change, morph, shift, become animated or fade in and out, fine—become fascinated with their flow patterns.

But what if the images just sit there statically for long periods of time? Then let your attention freely float over the surface of the static image. Note the direction(s) that pull you: right, left, top, bottom, center, overall, etc. In other words, apply the same *free floating* technique to the spatial volume of the images that you would apply to the spatial volume of sensations in your body.

Eventually the static image will either abruptly vanish or begin to shift and change and then vanish. Of course it may reappear again, but that’s okay since the goal is simply to be precise and accepting of what is. Keep in mind, “the bigger it gets and the longer it lasts, the deeper it cleans.”

At some point clear image activity may diminish and you become primarily aware of subtle activity or no activity (a blank mental screen). If you wish to continue working with the image function, then go to Step 5 if subtle predominates, or go to Step 6 if blankness predominates.

STEP 5 — Focus continuously on that subtle image activity.

1. In each moment be sensitive to whether that activity gets...
 - a. stronger

- b. weaker
- c. remains the same

If it increases, let it. If it decreases, let it. If it remains constant, let it.

In other words, yield to the patterns of activation and deactivation of subtle visual mental activity, letting it “massage” image home base.

2. Get a sense of the shape and spatial extent of the subtle image activity. It may be two-dimensional like a screen or three-dimensional like a stage.
 - a. Track the patterns of activation and deactivation over the totality of that spatial extent.
 - b. At some point it may become wavy, vibratory. Notice how this parallels what happens to body sensations when they “break up.”
3. Maintain this focus for as long as possible. With consistent practice it will...
 - a. Integrate your subconscious mind
 - b. Nurture your intuitive faculties
 - c. Produce deep internal peace
 - d. Free you from the bondage of “somethingness” (Jewish mystics called this *bittul ha yesh*, “the annihilation of somethingness.” In Buddhism it’s called *shunyata*, “emptiness.”)

STEP 6 — You have three choices:

1. Be tangibly aware, second- by-second, that a true absence of images is a restful state free from the perception of people, places and things. Free from the perception of past memory, present surroundings and future plans. Conversely, whenever you are not free from such perceptions, investigate how that perception arises sensorially. You may find that subtle, fleeting images are involved. Subtle activity is significant (i.e., creates the world!)
2. If you perceive lack of imagery as a problem, then do a process to develop sensitivity to the image function (such as those described in Step 7 below.)
3. Realize that having no image component to your thinking is fine; there is no need to do anything about it. Shift to exploring some other aspect of experience such as body sensation or internal conversation.

STEP 7 — Exercises for Developing Sensitivity to Mental Imagery

The following exercises, if practiced regularly for a period of time, will help you develop a sensitivity to the image function.

1. Working with “present reality” imagery
 - a. Close your eyes for a moment to get settled.
 - b. Open your eyes and look at your surroundings on all sides. Right, left, front, up, down, back, then look at your own body.

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- c. Again close your eyes and focus on whatever visual impression of your surroundings may be present. Also be aware of your body outline/body image. These impressions of self and surroundings may be exceedingly vague, ghostly, wispy or they may be vivid and panoramic.
 - d. Focus all your attention on this “present reality” imagery of self and surroundings no matter how vague it may be.
 - e. Notice how images of the surroundings may be triggered by external sounds.
 - f. Notice how images of self/body may be triggered by body sensations.
 - g. There are two possible outcomes from all of this. Either is as desirable as the other.
 - i. The “present reality imagery” may never completely disappear. In this case stay focused on it for a while. Be sensitive to its “impermanence,” i.e., whether it is stable or changes.
 - ii. The present reality imagery may utterly vanish. In this case repeat the exercise from (1b) above for as many cycles as you wish.
2. Evoking memory-based images
- a. Intentionally recall a person from the near or distant past. Focus on the memory image of that person until it completely vanishes. Clearly detect the moment that it vanishes. Then repeat the exercise (with the same person or a different person) for as many times as you would like.
 - b. Intentionally recall a physical object from the near or distant past. Focus on the memory image of that physical object until it completely vanishes. Clearly detect the moment that it vanishes. Then repeat the exercise (with the same physical object or a different one) for as many times as you would like.
 - c. Intentionally recall a place from the near or distant past. Focus on the memory image of that place until it completely vanishes. Clearly detect the moment that it vanishes. Then repeat the exercise (with the same place or a different place) for 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. Clearly detect the moment that it vanishes. Then repeat the exercise (with the same person or a different person) for as many times as you would like.
 - b. Intentionally think of a physical object you will be seeing in the near or distant future. Focus on the future image of that physical object until it completely vanishes. Clearly detect the moment that it vanishes. Then repeat the exercise (with the same physical object or a different one) for as many times as you would like.
 - c. 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. Clearly

detect the moment that it vanishes. Then repeat the exercise (with the same place or a different place) for as many times as you would like.

4. Intentionally evoking other image types

- a. Intentionally visualize a symbol. Focus on it, however wispy, until it completely vanishes. Clearly detect the moment that it vanishes. Then repeat the exercise (with the same symbol or a different symbol) for as many times as you would like.
- b. Intentionally visualize a simple geometric form (triangle, circle, etc.) Focus on it, however wispy, until it completely vanishes. Clearly detect the moment that it vanishes. Then repeat the exercise (with the same form or a different one) for as many times as you would like.

5. Using emotionally charged images

- a. Intentionally think of a person (place, 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 (i.e., attempt to let them be 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, object) that has a strong positive emotional association (that is makes you feel love, joy, excitement, entertainment, humor, etc.) To the best of your ability ignore the pleasant feelings (body sensations) and mental talk this image may evoke (i.e., attempt to let them be 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.

6. Using special situations

Certain situations are strongly “eidogenic” (tend to induce images). Focusing on imagery when you find yourself in these situations can help sensitize you to the “eidetic component” of your thought process. Here are a few 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 visuo-spatial 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 even close your eyes because the urge to “see” is so strong.)
- d. Listen to TV shows or movies with your eyes closed. Notice how you now create the “video portion.”

- e. Imagery is often vivid when you are sleepy or in the twilight zone between waking and sleep (hypnagogic imagery, theta imagery).

STEP 8 — The Feeling Connection

In the above process (Steps 1 to 7), all one needs in order to work effectively with the image component of thought? Yes...but.

If after applying the above procedure for a period of time the images still seem to be a “problem” (in the sense that it is hard to be matter-of-fact about them), then it is probably due to the presence of emotional body feelings associated with the images. Such feelings may be pleasant, unpleasant or mixed. They may have distinct qualities (anger, fear, erotic, hurt, joy) or be vague subtle stirrings. There are several ways in which images and body feelings may be associated:

1. Image may trigger body feeling
2. Body feeling may trigger image
3. Image and feeling may arise simultaneously as a single linked event
4. Image and feeling may occur at the same time but with no obvious connection between them

Here “A triggers B” means:

1. A produces B where there was no B
or
2. A intensifies B beyond its presently existing base level

So at some point you may find it interesting (or necessary) to trace out the “image-feeling connection.” One way to do that is...

1. Place some attention at image home base and some attention over your whole body
2. Monitor the following logical possibilities second-by-second
 - a. Image and feeling both occur (label: “image and feel”)
 - b. Image occurs without feeling (label: “image”)
 - c. Feeling occurs without image (label: “feel”)
 - d. No image or feeling occurs (label: “none”)

Challenges and Confusions: What Does it Mean If...?

Q: I can’t detect any images. What should I do?

A: First let’s make sure that you understand what I mean by image. Sometimes people are misled by the word, thinking that “image” implies more than it does. For example, they may think that a mental visual perception must be vivid or in some way special to qualify as an image. It may help to reread the section *Introduction: Terminology*. Having clearly grasped the definition of image, if you usually detect few or none you can:

Forget for a while about working with images and focus on other phenomena such as internal conversations or body sensation. Having little or no images is not a bad thing.

Do exercises that sensitize you to the image function. (See section *Method: Step 7*)

Q: Sometimes I get images that are so emotionally charged that I cannot simply observe them with detachment. What can I do?

A: Images *per se* are simply internally generated patterns of light (that is pure form). Any emotional charge carried by them would come largely through the associated mental comments and body sensations - especially the body sensations (feelings). Try focusing on these associated phenomena until you get some equanimity (see the article *Equanimity*), then go back to working with just the images again. You may find it a little easier this time.

Q: I can't find any "mental screen." What should I do?

A: First let's make sure you understand what is meant by mental screen. Sometimes people are misled by the word "screen" thinking they are to find in their mind something resembling the rectangular screen of a TV set or movie house. That is certainly not the case. The term "mental screen" probably arose because, for many people, images usually appear somewhat flat and in front of the eyes as they do on a movie screen. (Although for others the images are fully 3-D, in which case one might speak of a mental stage or theater.) In any event, "mental screen" is simply a synonym for "image home base."

Q: I don't seem to have an "image home base." What should I do?

A: That's okay. You need not struggle to find one. When you work with images, rest your attention in front where the external light comes through your eyelids or place it elsewhere (or nowhere) if that suits you. Then simply be attentive to images wherever they may occur.

Q: I have more than one "image home base." Where should I rest attention when working with images?

A: Try resting it over the whole space consisting of all the image home bases taken together.

Q: Sometimes a particular image (or the whole image home base) dramatically expands. What should I do?

A: That's a very good sign. Let it expand as far as it wishes. (Also let it contract as it wishes.)

Q: My "image home base" and "talk home base" seem to be in the same place, so it's hard to separate talk and image.

A: Normally talk and image are distinct both in terms of spatial position and sensory quality, but some people experience the situation you describe. No problem! talk and image may co-occur spatially, but they can still be separated in terms of sensory quality. Focus selectively on the photic/visual quality of images for a while. Then focus selectively on the sonic/audio qualities of the talk for a while. This should develop the ability to distinguish them even when they co-occur spatially.

Q: Is it possible to maintain contact with the mental image function with the eyes open?

A: Definitely! In fact, this is precisely what people do when they “daydream.” Daydreaming could be defined as a spontaneous, non-mindful open-eyed contact with the mental image function. To establish intentional, mindful contact, try the following.

Rest attention at image home base with your eyes closed. Maintain contact with the image function as you slowly open your eyes. Practice this over and over again until you can maintain contact with the image function even as you go about daily affairs. Of course the images will probably get washed out a bit by the brightness of external vision. You may only be able to detect them as subtle activation. It’s a little like learning to still see the moon as the sun rises.

Q: Images almost always vanish as soon as I note their presence. I never seem to be able to actually observe them.

A: “Observe” in the context of mindfulness simply means monitor the phenomena as it is. It is in the nature of mental images (and internal sentences) to sometimes spontaneously truncate as soon as we become aware of them. Simply noticing that fact is all you have to do. You have then “observed” it as it is.

So if the image disappears upon detection, be aware. What occurs immediately after that? A new clear arising, a subtle undercurrent of activity or absolute quiescence?

Q: I can’t seem to get rid of images.

A: Stop trying to! Just observe them as they are. If their presence annoys you, note the feeling connection.

“Image with annoyance, Image no annoyance”

Develop precision and equanimity with the annoyed sensations caused by images imposing themselves on you.

Q: I get many simultaneous images of different things and can’t keep track of them.

A: Try covering the whole field of imaging with awareness without necessarily trying to pay attention to any particular image. Observe how the field of many images moves as whole, moment-by-moment; look through and around the complex image array rather than at individual images.

Q: I don’t get any “subtle image activity.”

A: The noting categories I use are always “agenda free.” That means:

1. One category is not considered better than another.
2. We are not necessarily trying to experience all (or ever more than one!) of the categories.

“Subtle” is included among the categories because it corresponds to an experience that some people have some time. It is not an intentional goal to get it, but it can be productively explored if it occurs spontaneously.

Q: You say it is important to distinguish mental imagery from both “remnant light” that comes through one’s eyelids and “pseudo-light” -- color, swirls, geometric patterns and so forth. When I attempt to track mental imagery, I get “subtle activity,” remnant light

and pseudo-light all tangled into a single perception before my eyes. It seems impossible to tease out the strands. What should I do?

Then just focus on that mixed perception. Be aware of its impermanence (patterns of stability and change). Yield to its impermanence. That's enough. You might also try doing the sensitizing exercises described in *Step 7* above. A week or two of doing those exercises daily might help you detect image events more clearly.

Angels and Insights: Overview of Imagery Techniques Around the World

Five Basic Approaches to Working with Imagery

The approach to imagery outlined above stands in stark contrast to that encountered in most writings on spirituality or self-help. It represents one out of five basic orientations to the subject. Each of these five has its own legitimate place, but one should bear in mind that they represent essentially distinct endeavors. For the sake of completeness I will list them, then briefly comment on each.

1. Visualizing with the intention of achieving a specific goal “in the real world”
2. Visualizing with the intention to create relaxation or concentration
3. Seeking spiritual visions for inspiration and personal guidance
4. Visualization as practiced in the Vajrayana tradition
5. Just observing imagery as it is

1. Imaging to Affect the Material World

This category covers a wide range of practices:

1. Health-related (visualizing a disease dissolving, visualizing perfect health, etc.)
2. Sports-related (visualizing your perfect tennis swing, power lift, etc.)
3. Moral (visualization associated with loving kindness and similar practices, visualizing world peace and so forth.)
4. New Age (“think and grow rich,” etc.)

2. Imaging to Create Relaxation or Concentration

Relaxation is probably what most people think of first when they hear the word imagery. (“Imagine yourself on a secluded beach at sunset relaxing with the rolling rhythms of the surf...”) This kind of imaging has its place, especially if it helps a person calm down enough to get some equanimity. But its effects are usually temporary.

More important are the possible concentrative effects of imagery. In Theravada Buddhism this usually involves working with *nimittas* and *kasinas*.

During meditation some people become aware of a stable region of internal light (point, disk, cloud, etc.) or experience their whole inner visual field dominated by a uniform stable color. The former phenomenon is called a *nimitta* (sign of approaching absorption trance) and the latter a *kasina* (“totality” cf. the Gestalt term *ganzfeld*). These phenomena are quite different from the commonly experienced color arabesques referred to in *Phenomena Related to but Distinct from Mental Imagery*. If such a *nimitta* or *kasina* occurs, the meditator has a choice:

1. Intentionally focus on it as a means of developing high concentration and one-pointedness of mind.
2. Treat it as nothing special and continue with whatever technique one had been practicing

The first choice involves creating a feedback loop between unconscious fluctuations in the deep mind and observable perturbations in these inner light phenomena. This leads to a spontaneous quiescence of those subconscious fluctuations, an effect that is normally not under conscious control. Thus, the basic principle of what is now called “biofeedback” has been known and practiced by Buddhists for centuries!

3. Seeking spiritual visions for inspiration and personal guidance: Angels, spirits, gods, ghosts and guides

Receiving guidance and inspiration through spiritual visions has been a major component of religious experience from time immemorial. The revelations of Biblical prophets, the *epiphaniae* of the pagan mystery cults, and the visionary experiences of saints and shamans all over the world fall into this category.

Those who have such experiences are usually (and understandably!) quite emotionally involved with the specific content of the guidance, aid or blessing they receive. However, from the standpoint of the fourth and fifth approach listed below, the deeper significance of the phenomenon lies elsewhere and is typically overlooked.

The deeper significance is this.

Spiritual visions arise from a very deep place in consciousness, a place near the Spiritual Source itself. This is reflected in the Hebrew names for the highest forms of angels: seraphim (*saraph*: “one who burns” viz. in the lambent flames of God’s creative energy) and cherubim (*keruv*: “one who is close” viz. to the Source).

If one becomes fixated on the forms, one loses a precious window of opportunity—the chance to directly touch the formless flow whence the forms ferment. Put alternatively, when we look *through* the forms of individual spirits we can glimpse the creative flow of Great Spirit.

4. Visualization as practiced in the Vajrayana tradition

The “just observe” approach described in *How to Be Mindful of Mental Imagery* is based on the principles of vipassana meditation derived from the Theravada tradition of Southeast Asian Buddhism. Theravada represents the sole surviving school of Hinayana Buddhism. The Hinayana (“Small Vehicle”) is believed to preserve something close to Buddhism as it was practiced in its earliest stages in India. In later centuries, new schools arose: Mahayana then Vajrayana.

As the centuries passed, the tendency to glorify the Buddha gained momentum. (The Buddha had vehemently discouraged these tendencies when he was alive.) With the advent of the Mahayana (“Great Vehicle”) in the 1st century B.C., the Buddha was virtually deified and archetyped. Moreover, Buddhism began to accumulate a vast pantheon of totally mythological Buddhas, each with distinctive and glorious super-human attributes. These, along with Bodhisattvas, guardians and other Buddhist “deities” were worshipped daily among the masses with ceremonies reminiscent of the *pujas* offered to the Hindu gods.

Thus in the popular mind, enlightenment was equated with becoming an archetypical deity and hence far removed from anything attainable by ordinary people in a reasonable length of time. All this is, of course, in direct opposition to what the Buddha himself had taught.

This being the case, what could be done to restore the prospect of enlightenment to its proper (central) position in the tradition?

One obvious remedy would be the “allopathic” one: fight against the mythologizing tendencies and stick to the original teaching of the Buddha as preserved in the Hinayana traditions. One problem with this is that the mythologizing tendency is already present in Hinayana itself. Orthodox Theravadans believe, for example, that the Buddha was 16 feet tall!

Another possible remedy is the “homeopathic” one: if you can’t beat ‘em, join ‘em. If the Buddha is an archetypical image of perfection and if people insist on performing daily devotional ceremonies to him, then figure out a way that all this can be utilized to help them experience classical enlightenment in this lifetime.

Eventually a brilliant and ingenious strategy was developed to achieve just that. And with this was born the third and final school of Indian Buddhism known as Vajrayana (the “Diamond Vehicle”).

This school, which forms the basis of the Tibetan civilization, is also known as Tantric or Esoteric (Secret) Buddhism.

So what was this “brilliant and ingenious strategy”? In other words, what is the “secret” of Secret Buddhism?

A persistent theme encountered on this website is how ones sense of identity arises through the interaction of body sensations, internal conversations and mental imagery. What would happen if you systematically replaced your usual “body-image-talk” components with those of a spiritual archetype — a god, goddess, Buddha or bodhisattva? Would you cease being your usual self and become that archetype? Yes! But only for as long as you intentionally maintain the component-wise replacement. Furthermore, this will occur even though you know archetype to be a mere myth!

À propos of this rather outrageous claim, several questions naturally arise.

1. Why should anyone believe this?
2. What kind of body sensations, internal conversations and mental imagery does a *myth* have, anyway?
3. What does *any* of this have to do with enlightenment as originally taught by the Buddha?

Let’s take these one at a time

Q: Why should anyone believe such a claim?

In response to this I can only say, “Don’t knock it ‘till you try it.” (Remember though, giving something like this a “fair trial” assumes considerable concentration ability.)

Q: What kind of body sensation, internal talk and mental image does a god have?

Consider the following:

1. Divine body sensation could be represented by
 - a. Kinesthetic sensations produced when making sacred gestures, eventually replacing all other touches (Sanskrit: *mudra*).
 - b. Emotional feeling sensations of love, compassion, etc. triggered by the archetypal image of the deity, eventually replacing all other feelings (Sanskrit: *bhava*).
2. Divine self-talk could be represented by soothing symbolic syllables (Sanskrit: *mantra*) repeated at your talk home base and eventually replacing your monkey mind.
3. Divine self-image would simply be the form of the deity itself visualized in the place where you usually look to find your body outline/self-image when your eyes are closed, replacing your usual self image and indeed all other images (Sanskrit: *dhyana*. Here *dhyana* is being used in the special sense of “visualization.”)

The natural time to practice this “component-wise ego replacement” would be during ones daily personal devotional service to the Buddha.

Q: What does this have to do with enlightenment as originally taught by the Buddha?

Basically it is something like this. When an arbitrary deity’s *mudra-bhava-mantra-dhyana* replaces your usual touch-feel-selftalk-selfimage, then you become that deity. Furthermore, when your ordinary touch-feel-selftalk-selfimage replaces the deity’s *mudra-bhava-mantra-dhyana*, then you become your ordinary self. Doing this many times with many different deities leads to insight:

1. Insight into how self identity arises in general
2. Insight into the arbitrary nature of self identification. If one can be anything then one is everything, but at the same time *no particular thing* — *no self* as was originally taught by the historical Buddha!

This then is the secret of Secret Buddhism! It is an “*upaya*,” a clever and ingenious way to bring people to the original insight of the Buddha in a culture that had utterly mythologized the Buddha.

If you understand this principle you will always see the basic forest and not get confused by the complexity of Tibetan Buddhism’s many trees.

(Strictly speaking, there are two “secrets” or innovations in Vajrayana Buddhism. The first, described above, marked the transition from Mahayana Buddhism to Tantric Buddhism in 8th century India. The second marked the transition from the “Lower Tantras” to the “Higher Tantras” at a somewhat later time. I shall not discuss this second innovation, lest we stray too far from the topic at hand.)

5. Just observing imagery as it is

This is the approach described in this article. Practiced consistently it can lead to insight and freedom.

Insight

Understanding how body images and body sensations get tangled and temporarily fixated, producing the impression that the body is a thing.

Understanding how images, sensations and self-talk get tangled and temporarily fixated, producing the impression that the self is a thing.

Understanding how fixation of conscious and subconscious imagery convinces us that the world is a thing.

Understanding the impermanent nature (Buddha nature, God nature) of all images, whatever their form.

Freedom

Freedom from traumatic imprints and disconcerting perceptions by staying with their associated imagery until it breaks up.

Freedom from ones inner demons by dispassionately observing archetypal images of sex, violence, terror, if these should arise.

Freedom from time by:

1. Having a *radically full experience* of images associated with past memory
2. Having a *radically full experience* of images associated with future plans
3. Having a *radically full experience* of images associated with present surroundings

Freedom from space by melting every image of place at the very instant it arises.

Freedom from “otherness” by melting every image of person or object at the very instant it arises.

Freedom to be creative through the elastic and vigorous flow of uncoagulated inner vision.