

Vision and visuality in Buddhism and beyond : an introduction

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山是山
... a mountain is a mountain is ...

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**Vision and Visuality in Buddhism and
Beyond: an Introduction**

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老僧三十年前。未參禪時。見山是山。見水是水。
及至後來親見知識。有個入處。見山不是山。見水不是水。
而今得個休歇處。依前見山祇是山。見水祇是水。
— 吉州青原惟信禪師，《五燈會元》卷第十七；《指月錄》卷第二十八

“Thirty years ago, at a time when I, now an elderly monk, had not yet begun to participate in Chan practices, I saw mountains as mountains and waters as waters. Later, when I had reached a more intimate insight into knowledge, I acquired an entry point from which I saw that mountains are not mountains and waters are not waters. And now that I have achieved tranquility, dwelling in a resting position, I see like before that mountains are only mountains and waters only waters.”

(The Sayings of Chan-Master Qingyuan Weixin of Jizhou recorded in the *Wudeng huiyuan*, j. 17 and *Zhi yue lu*, j. 28).

An awareness that vision provides much of the contents of knowledge about the world can be well attested in epistemological traditions East and West. Across many cultural traditions and languages, vision not only serves as the paradigmatic example for sensory perception in general, but it is also often used as a metaphorical reference to cognition. Vision-related semantics are therefore common in words for understanding and knowledge and many examples of words which basically signify the capacity of seeing have come to mean a state of or process within the mind, or indeed, a dimension of knowledge.¹

¹ Consider German ‘wissen/Wissen’ (‘to know, be aware of’/‘knowledge’), which is derived from the same Indo-European root underlying Latin *videre*, ‘to see’, or Gothic *witan*, ‘to observe’; or derivations of the Sanskrit root $\sqrt{dṛś}$ - (‘see’) featuring in words such as *darśana*

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Still, the apparently direct connection between vision and cognition is not unproblematic. In spite of being so crucial for our perceptual and cognitive access to the world, a striking ambivalence about vision arises from its capacity to make us believe that things are as they appear to sight. That this belief is misleading in many ways has been repeatedly stressed in the history of knowledge. A deeply ingrained distrust into what seems obvious and self-evident is already implicit in Plato's cave allegory. And this skepticism persists throughout the history of philosophy and science, famously reverberating in Galileo's early modern complaint about vision as an impediment to philosophy, or, more recently, in Francisco Varela's (1946–2001) characterization of vision as the most effective way to generate illusions. Similarly, Wang Fuzhi 王夫之 (1619–1692), a Chinese philosopher belonging to an intellectual tradition entirely unrelated to Plato's doubts about the obvious, argued that the human ability to visually recognize shapes and forms is so inaccurate that it obscures rather than generates valid knowledge about the world.

Taking this into account, why is it that different cultural traditions likewise found their conceptions of knowledge formation and representation mainly on vision-based practices? Why can we observe throughout the history of knowledge that the search for a theoretically and practically reliable access to the world through vision has continued to constitute one of the major epistemological and soteriological challenges? Does this imply an underlying assumption that vision *can* supply us with valid knowledge about the world, and a belief or hope that the world *can* be seen correctly?

While the achievement of this kind of unimpaired or true vision is admitted across many periods and cultural traditions, there is considerable variation in how they conceive of its nature, its necessary preconditions, and the knowledge obtained through it. Are we to conclude, then, that these differences are based on fundamentally divergent assumptions about the world?

In Buddhist theories of cognition, the knowledge perceived through our senses is captured by a term which literally translates as 'evidence in front of the eyes' (Skt. *pratyakṣa pramāṇa*, Chin. *xianliang* 現量). This terminological choice corroborates the paradigmatic prominence of the visual sense in perception. Along with inference (Skt. *anumāna pramāṇa*, Chin. *biliang* 比量) and, in earlier periods, the word of the Buddha (Skt. *āgama pramāṇa*, Chin. *shengjiaoliang* 聖教量), perception "before one's eyes" counts as a fundamental kind of evidence (*pramāṇa*) providing valid knowledge.

On the other hand, Buddhism is nonetheless suspicious of vision due to its involvement in the continuous aggregation of the sensory material constituents

('view, doctrine, teaching') or *dṛṣṭi* ('view, position, notion', etc.); English 'I see' in the sense of 'I understand'; notice also 'in(tro)spection', 'evidence'. A similar etymological nexus is provided by 'idea' from Greek 'εἶδος', 'image', and 'theory', from θεωρέω, 'I look at, spectate, observe, contemplate', and, by metaphorical extension, 'I consider, speculate'.

(Skt. *rūpaskandha*) that prepare the ground for the *illusion* of a persistent self. In such cases, vision implies something quite opposite to the direct access to the world: Since the seeing consciousness that conceives itself as an entity which sees (the “subject” of seeing) is considered as fundamentally conditioned and hence devoid of persistent substantiality, what this seeing sees is not accepted as an independently existent external realm open for human exploration. By consequence, Buddhism focuses not on the exploration of the external world as the “subject” believes to see it, but on gaining an awareness of the composite and illusionary nature of *both* the seer and the seen, the perceiving “subject” and its apparent “objects”.

In contrast to this, European models of vision and techniques of representation developed during the Renaissance and Early Modern periods are based on the assumption that a direct and “mathematically” accurate access to the external world from the subject’s perspective is possible. For conceptualizations of visual perception such as Cartesian perspectivism, the paradigm of the *camera obscura*, or methods of representation based on the theories of linear perspective, the assumption is crucial that vision functions according to the laws of physics and thus provides a neutral and undistorted access to the world.²

Such conceptions of vision as a neutral physical transmitter of stimuli from an external world involve a certain ambivalence. On the one hand, the understanding of vision in terms of a physical connection between the viewer and the viewed suggests a notion of materiality and tangibility of the visual process.³ On the other, such a conception also implies that there is a transition, in vision, from materiality to pure mentality. However, as it does not provide a convincing explication of how a physicalist concept of perception allows for being linked to a non-physicalist understanding of reason and thought,⁴ this conception sustains mind-body dualism.

2 For an outline of the rise of the early modern models of vision and the whole context of the early modern “rationalization of sight”, see Robert S. Nelson’s introduction to Nelson ed. (2000). This volume contains studies on alternative forms of visuality and models of vision “which fall either before or outside the scientific revolution” (p. 3) and includes a contribution on Chinese Buddhist visuality by Eugene Wang.

3 Incidentally, the etymology of the Latin term for perception also refers to the notion of physical contact by visual rays. The root contained in Latin *perceptio* is derived from Indo-European *keh₂p- ‘to seize, grab’, and ultimately signifies tactile contact. By contrast, the corresponding Ancient Greek term αἴσθησις ‘perception, knowledge’ is thought to be related to the verb δῖω ‘perceive, hear’ (cf. Latin *audiō* ‘hear’ < PIE *h₂eui-d^hh₂-ie/o-), apparently privileging the auditory sense.

4 Cf. Descartes’ attempt to solve this problem by assuming the existence of a special organ, the “pineal gland”, where the transition should take place (*Dioptrics*, 1637, AT VI 129, see Descartes 1996). In more recent form, this dualism finds formulation in David Chalmers’ work who is also known to have coined the expression the “hard problem of consciousness” (Chalmers 1995 and 1996).

The disconnection between the mechanics of vision and the interpretative workings of the mind is a baffling issue, also in recent research on visual perception in some paradigms of cognitive science.⁵ One of the problems associated with the apparent disconnect is that if a basic level of vision is assumed as neutral and cognitively impenetrable,⁶ that is, reduced to a purely physical input from the external world (such as e.g. a projection of light onto the retina), this does not allow for an explanation of how the rich reality we experience and *we believe we see* is constituted.⁷ Nor does it clarify how the experienced reality is grounded in what is actually connected to this arguably neutral visual perception.⁸ Thus, a seemingly unambiguous model of vision – the one that assumes the construction of an internal replica of the outside world based on the projection of external objects into the internal mental structures – becomes contradictory at some point: the more it insists on the neutrality of the visual mechanism, the more it has to augment the role of the mind in explaining how the bare input from the outside can be transformed into the rich and meaningful representation which we experience as the external world. Conversely, once the interpretative role of the mind is extended to this degree, it becomes a very sophisticated issue to link up the symbolic superstructure created by the mind to a kind of allegedly “pure seeing”.⁹ Without this linkage, however, the correspondence of the internal model of the world to the external environment remains, by and large, theoretically unwarranted.¹⁰

That vision is not just a direct sense-contact with the immediate external environment and that perceptual activity, at a basal level, gets intertwined with and inseparable from other cognitive functions is an idea that many theories of perception and cognition – both pre-modern and more recent – would agree

5 For an overview of the debates between different traditions of cognitive science on such issues see for example the Introduction in Noë and Thompson, eds. 2008. This volume includes contributions, most of them previously published, that became classical in advocating a particular position in the debates.

6 In cognitive science and philosophy, influential proponents of this view include Zenon W. Pylyshyn and Jerry A. Fodor, see for instance Pylyshyn 1999, Fodor/Pylyshyn 1981.

7 Cf. Noë and Thompson 2008: 1–2.

8 Cf. *Ibid.* and Milner and Goodale 1998.

9 Cf. Noë and Thompson 2008: 1–3.

10 Cf. a Pylyshyn 2007: 7: “Philosophers [...] have understood that when you postulate representations – as everyone in cognitive science does – you are assuming that the contents of the representation correspond, or could correspond, in some way to entities and properties in the world, or at least in some possible world. Yet there is no straightforward way that the world *causes* the particular contents that our representations have [...]; rather the world may *satisfy* the representation, or the representation may be *true of the world*.”

upon.¹¹ The patterns of the relation between visual cognition and cognizing vision, akin to the twists of a Moebius loop, make it hard to determine the contributions of actual seeing and interpretation in the visual process. Indeed, they make it well-nigh impossible to extract *anything* that could plausibly count as “pure” perception. In this context, Daniel Dennett concludes that “[...] the idea that we can identify perceptual – as opposed to conceptual – states by an evaluation of their contents turns out to be an illusion.”¹² Similarly, Merleau-Ponty (1908–1961) asserted that “[...] this elementary perception is therefore already charged with a meaning” and that “the pure impression is [...] not only undiscoverable, but also imperceptible and so inconceivable as an instant of perception.”¹³

These observations have far-reaching implications for our understanding of vision: if no “pure” visual perception can be safely isolated and if it is affected by our cognitive system right from the start, there is no basis to assert that it relates to the external “objective” world in a more direct way than it does to internal, hence “subjective” factors. In the course of the 20th century, such insights turned long-established notions of perception-as-reception upside down. Accordingly, the more traditional focus of research in visual perception on how the input from the outside is processed by cognition gave way to research on how cognitive processes *change* what we perceive.¹⁴ Some researchers have even concluded that the “grand illusion” about perceptual experience consists precisely in thinking “we see”,¹⁵ that is the impression of the external world that, according to our belief, we receive from outside is in fact a mental figment “forged” by a “false consciousness”. Stated more simply: “We do not see what we think we see”.¹⁶ In philosophical terms, such understandings of perceptual processes tend to intersect with constructivist ideas

11 Regarding early Buddhist views on such intertwinings, see for example an excellent analysis of the concept *papañca*, especially as how it is connected with the process of sense-perception, in Ñāṇananda 1986, 2ff.

12 Dennett 1996: 171.

13 Cf. Merleau-Ponty 1962: 3–4. Others underline that “seeing” equals “seeing as” (see, e.g., Raftopolous and Machamer 2012: 3, with reference to positions of Churchland 1988, Hanson 1958, Kuhn 1962).

14 Cf., e.g., Lupyan 2020; Noë 2012: 2. However, there is another influential strand of research on visual perception and cognition which assumes a direct link between visual stimuli from the environment and specific motor outputs of the organism. Such type of visual system is sometimes called “vision for action” in the research literature and a distinction is made between “vision for action” and other types of cognitive systems which are responsible for creating an internal representation of the world outside subserving memory, semantics, planning, and communication (see, e.g., Machamer and Osbeck 2012; Matthen 2005; Milner and Goodale 1995, 1998).

15 Cf. Dennett 1996.

16 Noë and Thompson 2008: 1–3.

that we create rather than perceive the objects of our knowledge.¹⁷ This perspective renders the issue of differentiating between “real” and “constructed” objects notably perplexing¹⁸ and, in some radical forms, it even leaves little room for postulating an independent existence of objects in the external world at all – with all the well-known consequences for correspondence theories of “truth” or “objectivity”.¹⁹ Since the beginning of the 20th century, the validity of some central

17 Cf. von Glasersfeld (1984: 24): “[K]nowledge does not reflect an “objective” ontological reality, but exclusively an ordering and organization of a world constituted by our experience “an ordering and organization of a world constituted by our experience.”

18 The whole issue merges with the time-honored controversies between nominalists, realists, and conceptualists over universals (there is of course rich literature on the issue. See, e.g. for a classical overview of these debates in Medieval philosophy and theology Carré 1946; for an account of the counterparts of nominalists, realists, and conceptualists in the modern philosophy of language and mind, see Quine 1960; for perspectives from recent philosophy and cognitive science on different aspects of interrelations between perception, reality and reference, see contributions in Raftopoulos/Machamer, eds. 2012).

Interestingly, such an interplay between real and constructed, or imagined, contents of seeing seems to be imprinted in the very semantics of the words for vision as they usually denote not only seeing things but also thinking things, speculating about, or imagining things. For example, the range of words deriving from the Sanskrit root $\sqrt{dṛś}$ extends from ‘seeing’ and ‘thinking’, to ‘imagining’ and ‘speculating’, with the word ‘dragon’, which also stems from the same underlying Indo-European root, being a culmination of such a mixture of meanings. Words such as ‘idea’, ‘theory’, ‘theater’ offer a range of meanings from something about which truth claims can be made (as in case of ‘theory’ or ‘idea’) to something whose function is to disguise and create an illusion. In Chinese, the word for ‘thinking’, ‘considering’, and ‘speculating’, ‘imagining’ – *xiang* 想 – is also the customary Chinese rendering of the Buddhist term *saṃjñā* ‘associative thinking’. Worth noticing is here the iconic choice of the graphic components of the character by the creators of the early script, combining ‘tree’ (*mu* 木) and ‘eye’ (*mu* 目) in a “syssemantic” (*huiyi* 會意) fashion, as well as its earliest lexicographic definitions as ‘to look at observantly’ (*xing shi ye* 省視也, cf. *Shuowen* 5.2152). While in pre-imperial philosophical texts, 相 *xiang* most commonly refers to the visual characteristics used by physiognomists and other skilled specialists to assess the inner qualities of persons and objects of their expertise, in the Buddhist adaptation of this word, the “illusionist” part of the spectrum of its meanings is predominant.

19 Consider the large work on deconstructing the concept of object in modern philosophy, occasionally informed by contemporary psychology. For a discussion on this topic, see, for instance, Quine 1960, Chap. 1, §1 “Beginning with ordinary things”. An example of an argument showing logical unsustainability of the model of vision and knowing in which a physical object that can be seen by a subject is posited is Buddha’s interrogating Ānanda about the locations of the Buddha’s characteristics, the one who sees them and the organs that allow one to see them, cf. *Śūraṅgamasūtra* (*Da Foding Shoulengyan jing* 大佛頂首楞嚴經; j. 1, T 945: 1.107a18–1.107a20). Curiously, this argument can be compared to Merleau-Ponty’s (1962: 67–72, 203–206) reflections about the process of objectification of the body: “the constitution of our body as object, since this is a crucial moment in the genesis of the objective world” “our own body evades, even within science itself, the treatment to which it is intended to subject it.”

philosophical concepts has been questioned precisely by showing that their formation is bound to taking for granted what is visually given, rather than considering its “constructed” nature. For instance, Ernst Cassirer (1874–1945) asserts that one of the basic concepts of Western philosophy – the concept of substance (*Substanzbegriff*) – is synonymous to *Gestalt* (‘image, appearance’).²⁰ Cassirer thus clearly emphasizes that the whole ontological presupposition about *being* in the philosophical tradition has its origin in what is visually given. Similarly, Merleau-Ponty criticizes the ideal of objective knowledge in classical physics and physicalist approaches, by claiming that – no different from and no less than common sense knowledge – it is grounded in “perceptual faith”.²¹

The dispute brought upon vision and visually derived knowledge notwithstanding, there is a strong argument in favor of vision that apparently cannot easily be discounted: it would be counterintuitive, to say the least, to deny that this sensory capacity is one of the major media of how we are involved in the world.²² Interestingly, a conciliatory attitude towards vision and, as a consequence, the necessity to resort to the data provided by it, has been justified throughout the history of knowledge, even if for radically different reasons: Descartes legitimized the trust in sense-perception, including vision, by Faith in God;²³ the evolutionary attitude is that our sensory capacities are designed and constantly transformed to fit the tasks of everyday life we confront; phenomenological perspectives would argue that – since our experience is inextricably tied to the world through the senses – we should concentrate on how reality is given in experience rather than on striving for some allegedly “objective” reality beyond the sense-data.

The epistemic tension pertaining to vision is thus resolved by the acknowledgement of the wide range of possible functions of vision – from creating illusions to giving access to the real world; from revealing and manifesting something to which being may be assigned and about which truth claims can be made, to concealing and disguising; from misguiding and deluding to educating and cultivating – that is, making the world and ourselves better!²⁴

20 Cassirer 1910: 81.

21 Merleau-Ponty 1968, esp. from p. 14.

22 Cf. Buddha’s assertion that the sensorium is all that is given (cf. *Sabba Sutta* of the *Saṃyutta Nikāya*, 4.15), which means that we should therefore not strive for an objective point of view of some reality which lies beyond the sensorium (argument adopted from Lusthaus 2002: 56).

23 Cf. Descartes’ *Forth Meditation*, Nr. 24, adopted from Drewermann 2006, 1: 373.

24 There is a vast literature on the role of images in human life in general and in view of their increasing role in contemporary cultures in particular, see e.g. the introductions and contributions to Boehm, ed., 2006; Gottuck et al., eds., 2019; Cremonini and Klammer 2020.

What makes “the difference”, then, is whether we are aware of the range of functions of vision, their cultural and historical varieties, and the aims for which its great power has been and can be used.

Undoubtedly, Buddhism in its many forms and traditions has deeply explored questions such as the significance, perils, and potential of visuality. For starters, Buddhist terminology abounds with visual metaphors. Besides its efficacy for transmitting the *dharmā*, the extensive use of visual imagery attests to the primacy of vision in Buddhist theories of perception and cognition. Many Buddhist sources show that visuality is considered essential in both its function of constituting the conventional world of experience (preconditioned or even determined by intentional structures and habitual patterns of the mind, Skt. *rūpadhātu*, 色界), and in attaining a clear vision of the world *as such* (Skt. *dharmadhātu*, 法界). Given the importance of visual perception for knowledge and the key role of perception for the constitution of the conventional view of ourselves and the surrounding world, it is obvious that to gain control over the visual sense is crucial in mental exercises along the path towards ultimate awakening (*samyaksaṃbodhi*). With this general focus, different Buddhist teachings have developed different perspectives on visuality and the complex frameworks of cosmological implications and epistemological orientations, in which specific conceptions of vision are embedded.

To simplify very complex discussions, early Buddhism in India focused on the various elements and processes of cognition to gain an awareness of the composite and thus illusionary nature of the world and the self. The ultimate abandonment of these grand illusions was considered as the culmination of soteriological endeavors and religious experiences. In complex processes of meditative and introspective practice, perception was supposed to be released from habitual conceptual patterns. The state of liberation from “attachments” and “intentions” would allow the practitioner to develop faculties which exceed the constraints and empirical qualities of ordinary sight, such that the dependence of a field of vision on the perspective of a perceiving center (“subject”) may be overcome.²⁵ While metaphoric references to vision regarding the ultimate state of “all-embracing knowledge” abound, “seeing things as they are” equals not-seeing and “vision” should therefore be understood in the abstracted sense of a kind of “purified reflection”.²⁶

Mahāyāna traditions assert the identity between the conventional world and how it is present “here and now” on the one hand, and the ultimate truth of the

²⁵ This account is adopted from Jens Schlieter’s unpublished paper “Transgressing the Boundary of Vision: The Horizon of Vision and Vision of the ‘Beyond’”, presented at the conference “Vision and Visuality in Buddhism and Beyond”, University of Zürich 2016. Reference with the permission of the author. See also Schlieter 2004.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

Buddha on the other. Thus, the achievability of true vision is affirmed in Mahāyāna Buddhism precisely because the world is incessantly present in its ultimate truth, in every moment and in the very shape that the eyes perceive.

However, there are also more specific interpretations of what constitutes true vision. For example, the practice of recollecting the Buddha(s) (*buddhānusmṛti*) consists in visualizing the Buddha as the ultimate source of wisdom and object of veneration. Guided by the 32 primary or eighty secondary ‘characteristics’ (*lakṣaṇa*, conventionally rendered by Chinese *xiang* 相) of the Buddha, these exercises concentrate on the bodily features defining the Buddha. Apart from the role of statues in Buddhist veneration practices, it was mainly this emphasis on visualization which, upon the arrival of Buddhism in China, struck the Chinese as the most prominent feature of the foreign religion – so much that they would later designate it as the “doctrine of images” (*xiangjiao* 像教).²⁷ There is evidence that the contact with Buddhism is essential to the heightened appreciation not only of visual arts like painting and sculpture, but also of specifically visual techniques of meditation so typical for religious Daoism.

While it would be a gross oversimplification to put Buddhism at the beginning of the visual arts in China, there can be little doubt that their rapid development in the medieval period is closely related to the impact of Buddhist ideas and practices. Adding to that the fine-grained Buddhist tools for describing and analyzing consciousness in general and perception in particular, it is therefore unsurprising that reflections on works of the visual arts like painting readily resort to Buddhist conceptions in China ever since.

Yet another interpretation of visuality is exemplified by discourses within Buddhist scholasticism about the unknowable and unimaginable Buddha and his relationship to the world of karmic retribution, often captured metaphorically by the contrast between the visible and the invisible. In China, this practice can be traced back to pre-Buddhist doctrines, which began to speculate about the unfathomable Dark (*xuan* 玄), allegedly underlying and engendering the cosmical processes of the appearance and demise of visible things since the Early Medieval period.

If we wish to designate reflections about the emergence of the image from an interplay of visualizing consciousness and visible matter as *aesthetics*, it is readily apparent that pre-modern Chinese aesthetics in general is marked by a deep Buddhist imprint ever since the spread of the religion in the first century CE. Due to its intricate interrelation with Buddhism, Chinese aesthetics from the very beginnings testifies to an understanding of vision and visuality which is based on pre-suppositions fundamentally different from “classical” Western aesthetics with its

²⁷ See, however, Greene 2018 for a critical assessment of this widespread interpretation of the term *xiangjiao*.

emphasis on *mimesis*. The image, rather than being understood as a representation of a scene from the external world, is argued to emerge from a complex interaction of contents and processes of consciousness operating on different levels of the mind. In its turn, the understanding of an image as a construct produced *by* the mind rather than as an imitation based on external similarity would find many analogies in modern Western theories of the image.²⁸

Disregarding little selective and ultimately sterile confrontations of “Eastern” versus “Western” concepts of vision and visuality, the present volume gathers detailed studies that approach the problem of vision and visuality in Buddhist and Buddhist-inspired texts from a number of different angles. Concentrating on the Eastern side of the pair, it seeks to provide a first sketch of a far more complex picture to be hopefully completed by further research efforts. Disciplinary boundaries related to modern academic institutions inevitably tend to impose their restrictions on an attempt as broad as this. While an awareness of the Buddhist contributions to Chinese cultural heritage has been rapidly growing over the past decades among sinologists, it is still often quite limited among those who are not specializing in Chinese Buddhism or in the larger East Asian Buddhist spiritual ecumene and its associated scriptural landscapes. Buddhist studies tend to focus more on the languages, the conceptual frameworks, and the discursive analysis of their texts; far less attention is paid to the uses of iconic forms and the specific significance of visuality.²⁹ Sinological studies of aesthetics, on the other hand, often uncritically impose conceptual frameworks onto Chinese sources and works of art which are inherited from Western analytic traditions and theories.

The contributors to the present volume open various perspectives on the general topic of vision and visuality in Buddhism and in Buddhist-influenced cultures of Eastern Asia. While some of the papers are dedicated to specific aspects of Buddhist scholasticism, art production and ritual practice in South and East Asia, others investigate how specific Buddhist views and concepts have informed the perception and understanding of vision in non-Buddhist traditions of China, both religious and aesthetic. This juxtaposition, the editors are convinced, is a necessary first step to define the direction future studies on this intricate complex of problems will have to take, many untouched aspects and remaining problems notwithstanding. The common heritage of an age-old experience of visual meditation accumulated in these varied and diverse witnesses of reflections on and practices of visuality certainly justifies our interest in the specific contribution of visual exercises to theories of cognition and aesthetics in Asia and beyond.

²⁸ See, for example, such classical works in this field as Gombrich 1960 and 1979, Goodman 1976.

²⁹ Important exceptions include Wayman 1984; Wang 2000, 2005; McMahan 2002; Yamabe 2005; Rotman 2008; Greene 2016, 2021a,b.

In “Seeing as Cognizing: Perception, Concepts and Meditation Practice in Indian Buddhist epistemology”, Cristina Pecchia addresses the *conceptualization of yogic vision* in the Buddhist epistemological tradition of South Asia. Against the backdrop of Ernst Steinkellner’s seminal work, Pecchia argues that the works of Dignāga (480–540 CE), Dharmakīrti (6–7th c. CE) and their followers started from “doctrinal presuppositions” for which they strove to provide philosophical support. In her paper, she concentrates on the role of meditation practices in Dharmakīrti’s (6–7th c. CE) work. What he writes on yogic visualization leads to an apparent tension in his discussion of perception: while Dharmakīrti invokes its non-erroneous character to set it apart from conception, he still holds that yogic perception accesses not only real but also *unreal* content in a vivid, non-conceptual manner. Does this, then, question the non-erroneous character of perception in meditational settings? Obviously, the unreality of the unreal objects the yogi views cannot be attributed to conception. What distinguishes them from unreal objects in non-meditational contexts is that they are *intentional* projections. It emerges that meditation is not aimed at transforming the way objects are conceptualized, but rather the mind’s attitude toward them. In her discussion of Dharmakīrti’s illustration of his claim that conception depends on *habit* rather than the *content* of a particular perception by means of the example of the dead woman identified as the beloved one by her lover, as food by a dog, and as a corpse by the yogi, Pecchia points out that these examples also occur in meditation practices such as the “contemplation in the cemetery” of the *Satipaṭṭhānasutta* (Discourse on the Foundations of Mindfulness). She concludes that Buddhist epistemologists took the knowledge of mental processes in meditative settings accumulated across centuries of exploration into account and thus made meditation practices such as yogic visualization an integral part of their discourse on cognition.

Nic Newton’s “The Uses of Light: Visuality, Metaphor and Rhetorical Strategy in the *Daśabhūmikāsūtra*” explores what we could characterize as the *visualization of a text*. Newton concentrates on uses of the light metaphor in the *Daśabhūmikāsūtra* (Ten States Sutra), light usually being a metonym for the knowledge of the Thus-gone (*tathāgata*) in Buddhist contexts. In view of an increased awareness of visuality in Buddhist studies, the paper sets out to interlink visuality and textual analysis, investigating the role of the visual for understanding and the exploitation of images for rhetorical effects. Newton focuses on a central metaphor of the *sūtra* under investigation, the so-called “peaked dwelling (*kūṭāgara*) of dense clouds of great light rays”. Discussing the semantics and connotations of the light metaphor as well as material representations of peaked buildings in Buddhist iconography, he presents a visual reconstruction of the opening scenes of the *sūtra*. He argues that the visual allows for a simultaneous representation and thus an intuitive illustration of the cumulative impact of the sequential build-up of a visual

spectacle upon the reader. From a detailed discussion of the metaphor of the peaked dwelling in the *Daśabhūmikaśāstra*, Newton argues that the *kūṭāgāra* here indeed functions as a genuinely visual metaphor in the sense that comparison is not included in the verbal but enabled by the performance of the visualization. He concludes that this is an intentional design of its authors who deemed light, the characteristic visual experience in meditation and concentration practices, equivalent in scope and power to the “knowledge of the Buddha”.

In “Some References to Visualization Practices in Early Chan Buddhism with an Emphasis on *guan* 觀 and *kan* 看”, Christoph Anderl discusses contemplation practices in early Chan Buddhism. His contribution addresses the problem of the *visualization of vision* and discourses reflecting the search for an understanding of vision eclipsing the dichotomy of viewer and viewed. Anderl elaborates on the contrast between two semantically similar expressions for contemplation, commonly encountered in early Chan Buddhism: *guanxin* 觀心 (“observing/contemplating the mind”) and *kanxin* 看心 (“seeing the mind”). Even if Buddhists had diagnosed ordinary vision as the major root of delusions, it soon came to be recognized as a powerful means of salvation, if purified through meditative and contemplative exercises. Such practices reached China in two different forms: analytical meditation methods such as “concentration and contemplation” (*zhi guan* 止觀) and visualization techniques aimed at viewing the Buddha. In a reaction against increasingly sophisticated scholasticism, Chan Buddhism in the seventh and eighth centuries CE started to focus on these methods. Anderl shows that this happened under the strong influence of “mind-only” (*vijñaptimātratā*) and “Buddha-nature” (*buddha-dhātu*) theories, which led to a shift of focus from bodily processes to more abstract objects such as the *dharmakāya* (dharma body) in meditation and to a tendency to redefine traditional concepts in terms of mental processes. The identification of objects and qualities as cognitions and their inclusion into the mental space made the “mind” (*xin* 心), the single object of visualizing exercises. Anderl argues that the two methods of visual contemplation under discussion are different with respect to the kind of mind they visualize: Unlike the earlier *guanxin*-meditation which viewed the mind both in its pure and defiled modes, the more recent *kanxin*-method exclusively focused on the pure “Buddha-mind”. Even if some of these early Chan sources emphasize that visualization is directed neither toward the agent nor the object seen, but rather focused on the very process of viewing itself, later Chan adherents refused these viewing practices which they considered inherently object-related and thus bound to fall into deluding dualism. Observing that these practices are essentially psychophysical in character in spite of the ever more elusive object of meditation, Anderl concludes that the increasingly more abstract objects of meditation paradoxically led to a shift of emphasis on its bodily and ritualist frame.

Hans-Rudolf Kantor's "Tiantai Buddhist Elaborations on the Hidden and Visible" deals with *metaphors of visibility* in early Buddhist scholasticism in China. He shows that Tiantai 天台 discourses capture what they conceive as a paradoxical relationship between doctrine and contemplation in terms of metaphors of visibility and invisibility. He demonstrates that the relevant vocabulary for conceiving this contrast between the visible "traces" (*ji* 跡) and their invisible "roots" (*ben* 本) – that is, the Buddha's manifest speech and his implicit salvation of all sentient beings – goes back to the indigenous Chinese tradition of "Dark Learning" (*xuanxue* 玄學) with its concern for the invisible source that allegedly sustains the realm of visibly distinctive forms. Kantor delineates how the dimension of the invisible "traces" underwent a positive reevaluation in Madhyamaka contexts through its identification, with the Buddhist concept of conventional truth (*saṃvṛtisatya*): what had been considered a mere obstacle to recognizing the hidden in "Dark Learning" came to be attributed a heuristic value and soteriological relevance due to its potential to enable the deluded being to transform into the opposite. Inheriting the visual metaphors of autochthonous Chinese scholarship, early Chinese Madhyamaka thus vested the non-duality of conventional and absolute truth (*paramārthasatya*) into the visual imagery of a paradoxical identity of the hidden and the visible.

Paulus Kaufmann's "Visuality in Esoteric Buddhism – Awakened with a Single Glance?" is an investigation of the thought of Kūkai 空海 (774–835 CE) which probes into the relationship between *visuality and ritual space*: Showing that Kūkai's references to *maṇḍalas* often do not allude to paintings, but rather to ritual procedures and the structure of reality itself, he argues against the common view that the founding figure of tantric Buddhism in Japan favored visual over verbal transmission. Kaufmann demonstrates that, quite to the contrary, Kūkai equated the visual and the verbal in their unsuitability to capture true reality. His detailed study starts from the observation that the paintings Kūkai invokes usually were *maṇḍalas*. Kaufmann goes on to emphasize that this word in its "genuine" sense did not simply mean a painting but was more generally conceived as the ordered system of the Buddha's wholesome acting in the world. Illustrating that the term *maṇḍala* can refer to three-dimensional structures, two-dimensional depictions and ritual enactments of objects, Kaufmann distinguishes between its "real", "iconic" and "ritual" meanings. He then points to the idea, central to esoteric Buddhism, that practitioners can ritually re-enact the deeds of the Buddha, and he argues that Kūkai often addresses *maṇḍalas* as real parts of the cosmic order rather than mere visual representations. Accordingly, Kaufmann concludes, the only sense in which a painted *maṇḍala* helps to elicit supernatural powers is in that it is the protected and purified ground on which the ritual union between Buddha and practitioner can take place. By consequence, the concrete text of a *sūtra* and the

dharmā-*maṇḍala* are just two different forms of manifestation of the same cosmic phenomenon. Rather than the dichotomy between aesthetic and referential signs they thus reflect the contrast between the contexts of initiation and exegesis in which paintings and writings are used, respectively.

Yang Xiao's "Maṇḍala within the Rock: The Visualization of the Mahāmāyūrī-vidyārājñī and its Altar in Southwestern China, 9–13th Centuries" discusses an example of the *visual design of ritual space* in esoteric Buddhism. In her study, she investigates the sculptural representations of the Peacock Wisdom King (Kongque ming wang 孔雀明王, Mahāmāyūrī-vidyārājñī) in seven rock carving sites in the Sichuan basin. The cult of the Peacock Wisdom King, a personification of the *Mahāmāyūrī Dhāraṇī*, an ancient Indian spell associated with the power of healing snake bites, originated in seventh c. CE Indian Tantric Buddhism. The sutra of the Peacock Wisdom King is extant in six Chinese versions, the most famous of which was established in the mid-eighth c. CE by Amoghavajra (Bukong 不空, 705–775), who supplemented his translation by a ritual manual. The Chinese used the apotropaic ritual for many purposes such as preventing bad weather, ending war, defending the country, protecting childbirth, curing diseases etc. In her paper, Yang Xiao compares the imagery and design of the altars or *maṇḍalas* with the guidelines in Amoghavajra's manual. She attributes discrepancies between the arrangement of the caves and the written sources to an adoption of iconographical innovations from India, imitation of figural constellations from exoteric Buddhism, addition of new figurative elements from other written sources, and the combination of the *Mahāmāyūrī* topos with other stories from Buddhism or folk religion. Yang distinguishes the caves into two different types: One closely reflects the specifications in Amoghavajra's manual. Their design can be interpreted as a three-dimensional representation of the two-dimensional *Mahāmāyūrī maṇḍala*. The other does not correspond to Amoghavajra's manual. Yang therefore suggests that these caves provide ritual spaces for laying out the *Mahāmāyūrī maṇḍala* on the ground of the site. In both cases, the visual outlook closely reflects the intended ritual function.

In "Meditation, Vision and Visualization in Daoism and Buddhism", Stephan Bumbacher addresses the *visualization of deities and of ritual interactions* in early Daoist meditation. He first discusses what are arguably the oldest textual witnesses for meditation in China from the early fourth c. BCE onward. Up to the late second century CE meditation is restricted to breathing techniques, a fact which may have encouraged not only that treatises on breath meditation were among the earliest translations of Buddhist texts into Chinese, but also that they adopted the technical vocabulary of certain corresponding indigenous traditions. Bumbacher further notes that in the second half of the second c. CE, some 20 years after the earliest complete translations of Buddhist texts into Chinese, there is evidence, in sources of

popular religious movements, of a new type of meditation which involves the visualization of objects: These exercises aim at visualizing body deities of inner organs in order to ascertain their presence and to establish direct communication with them; and they were soon extended to other supernatural beings like the deified Laozi 老子. Bumbacher not only shows that the earliest examples of this kind of visualization in Daoist texts appear precisely when Buddhist texts describing the visualization of the Buddha were first available in Chinese. He moreover provides an intriguing example of a close parallel between the medieval *Laozi zhong jing* 老子中經 (Central Scripture of Laozi, second/third c. CE) and the Upanishads. He argues that the Daoist descriptions of visualizations by priests of their own reception in audiences at the heavenly palace closely resemble Buddhist visualization of the Buddha in various Buddha-fields (*buddhakṣetra*), suggesting that Daoist sources most probably adopted the model of Buddhist *buddhānusmṛti* (visualization of the Buddha), so well-established in early medieval China. Unlike “shamanic” flights to heaven, which are documented for earlier periods of Chinese history and typically induced by external influences such as ecstatic music or drug consumption, Daoist visualization exercises – just like their Buddhist equivalents – required that the practitioner consciously follows a clear set of instructions. Bumbacher therefore concludes that all these parallels leave little doubt that Daoist visualization was strongly influenced by Buddhist models.

Rafael Suter’s “‘Pre-Buddhist’ Conceptions of Vision and Visuality in China and their Traces in Early Reflections on Painting” discusses how indigenous *notions of vision* informed early medieval Chinese reflections on the *visual arts*. Creativity in painting was henceforth associated with Buddhist meditation in Chinese discourses on art. Moreover, he shows that the idea of spiritual journeys to hermits or supernatural beings through imagined landscapes, which seems to have inspired the practice and reflections of landscape painting, was spurred by Buddhism. Suter’s study starts with a sketch of the beginnings of reflections on mountain and water painting in the fifth c. CE, proceeding to an exploratory investigation of pre-Buddhist texts on concepts of vision. From a close reading of the pertinent texts, it emerges that key terms in early painting “theory” such as ‘spirit’ (*shen* 神), ‘perspicacity’ (*ming* 明), ‘imagination’ (*xiang* 想), and ‘symbol’ (*xiang* 象) are here closely related to what appear to be physiological and physicalist conceptions of seeing and light in these early sources. In a concluding part, Suter discusses the possible relevance of these insights for the interpretation of Chinese theories of painting. While it seems that the new interest in imagination and pictorial representation in Early Medieval China may indeed have been inspired by Buddhism, the extraordinary notion of ‘spirit’ in related discourses seems closely related to Chinese traditions. Most notably, the appeal to the notion of the *samādhi* of free play and the related ‘superknowledges’ of the Buddha

(*shentong* 神通) appears to be of a derivative nature: Suter suggests that it was mediated by the inclusion of the very word ‘spirit’ and its implicit association with inherited conceptions of *shen* as a luminous force that animates, inspires, illuminates, and enlightens things, in Chinese renderings of the term.

Polina Lukicheva’s essay on representation and creativity in the aesthetics of 17th c. China vividly demonstrates the conceptual impact of Buddhist thought on Chinese art theory and practice. A case in point is the Ming literatus Li Rihua 李日華 (1565–1635) who elaborated a theory of pictorial order in terms of visualizations of different levels of consciousness, which he explicitly captured on the basis of concepts borrowed from the Buddhist “consciousness-only” (唯識 *weishi*; *vijñaptimātratā*, *yogācāra*) theory. Lukicheva’s interpretation of Shitao’s 石濤 (1642–1707) well-known theory of “one line” (*yi hua* 一畫) uncovers a whole range of Buddhist underpinnings in the understanding of the nature of image and pictoriality. In the last section of her essay, Lukicheva turns to more general discussions within Chinese lay Buddhist literati circles on whether an immediate access to the world *as it is* is possible, and, if it is, and this world can be pictorially represented – what does this world look like?

Third century India, ninth century Japan, seventeenth century China – the texts discussed in this volume are separated by hundreds of years and thousands of miles, they were composed in vastly different social, historical, and linguistic contexts, and they were written for very divergent purposes. But even if they consider visuality from many different angles they still do so in what is recognizably the same conceptual and soteriological framework. To reconstruct the continuities and disruptions in this line of transmission has the potential to reveal an intellectual history of vision and visuality that has developed largely independently from those Mediterranean and European traditions that have eventually shaped the modern scientific understanding of vision. Even if, at the end of the day, some aspects of the way Buddhist thinkers dealt with this problem turn out to be somewhat less unfamiliar than one might have expected, a better knowledge about theories and practices of vision rooted in Buddhism is obviously indispensable for reaching a global perspective on the history of vision and visuality. We are confident that the manifold studies gathered in this volume mark a first step towards this ambitious aim.

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