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Open Eye Meditation:
The visual way to the development of the inner sense

By Floco Tausin

Abstract

What is the inner sense and how do we develop it? This article deals with an open eye meditation method which involves the concentration on both material and subtle objects. As an example of a subtle object, I present the meditation practice on eye floaters (muscae volitantes) according to the four steps of meditation in the Yoga sutras by the Indian philosopher Patanjali.

Key words: Eye, Meditation, Inner sense, third eye, eye floaters, entoptic phenomena

Introduction

Delicately chiseled features and grey concrete blocks, monotonous traffic noise and resounding laughter, scratchy cigarette smoke and irritant perfume, sweet baklava and hot samosas, soft pillows and hard benches – what we know as our weekday is a tide of miscellaneous information which we receive with our five senses and put together to an integral picture in the brain. The sense organs are the gates of our body – they connect the outside world with the inner world and determine, dependent on our state of consciousness, how we experience this world.

No wonder, the spiritually awake individuals in the East and the West always paid great attention to their senses. Indian philosophers, for example, studied the interplay of sense organs, sense objects, thinking and consciousness very extensively. They concluded that an unbridled sense activity is an obstacle on the way to the realization of the self or God. It is said in the Bhagavadgita: “O son of Kunti, the senses are so strong and impetuous that they forcibly carry away the mind even of a man of discrimination who is endeavoring to control them.” (2.60) Sensual pleasure is regarded as deceitful because it “appears like nectar at first but poison at the end … it is said to be the nature of passion.” (18.38) Does this mean now that we should shut the eyes and stop the ears up if we try to lead a more spiritual and conscious life? Of course not, it’s rather about making the sensual activity useful for the consciousness development as well. To achieve this, the wise men and women of earlier times have given us a wonderful instrument: meditation.

In modern societies, meditation is often taught apart from a specific religion, partly as a therapeutic remedy for stress, strain, emotional problems etc. Practicing meditation will undoubtedly calm down our sense activity time and again and counteract an overstimulation of our sense organs, making us restless and dissatisfied. But meditation goes beyond a therapeutic application. It is a means to a

higher end, a step that should lead to more: the practitioner tries to gain knowledge of the world and of her- or himself which is clear from thoughts and feelings.

The inner sense

We can assume that such subtle knowledge takes place by the connection of a subtle sense organ with a subtle sense object. According to my teacher and seer, Nestor, I call this subtle sense “inner sense.” Nestor does not understand this inner sense as a sixth sense but as a combination of all five senses. The inner sense, therefore, is immediately related to the physical senses, which are internalized by it (Tausin, 2009).

The cosmic eye between the eyebrows of the Buddha. (Image: ddjang)

In many cultures and religions, we find the notion of an inner sense, thought of as a mode of perception which directly and intuitively gives insight to the essence or true nature of the object perceived. Often this subtle or inner sense is linked to the eye as a widespread symbol of light, cognition and truth. It is then addressed as the “inner eye,” “third eye” or “eye of the heart,” common among mystics who experienced the divine light. In Indian mythology, for example, this inner sense is expressed as god Shiva’s frontal eye that gives him unifying vision. Accordingly, tantric yogis try to open this third eye by activating the “Ajna Chakra,” located between the eyebrows. Likewise, the Buddha Siddhartha Gautama received enlightenment through a “celestial eye” (Pali: dibbacakkhu), which permitted him to understand the forces of existence and their manifestation in the chain of causality (Gonda, 1969; Meslin, 2005; Ramen, 2008).

The Greek philosophers spoke of an “Eye of the Spirit” which has to be opened and purified to see the truth (Hansen, 1998; Scheerer, 2007). While the Old Testament calls the prophets “seers” and refers to an all-seeing eye or “Eye of Providence” that turns to those who fear God and gives them superior insights or strength (Meslin, 2005), the New Testament takes up the Greek philosopher’s notion of the “Eye of the Soul or Heart:” the eye becomes the object of purity (Matthew, 6.22), and the Eye of the Heart has to be opened in order to see God (Acts 9.18, Rom 1.19). Likewise, the Muslim mystics, the Sufis, identified the “eye of the heart” (Arabian: ‘ayn al-qalb; Persian: chishm-i dil) with the imminant intellect. The famous Persian poet Hatif writes: “Open the ‘eye of the heart’ so that thou canst see the spirit / And gain vision of that which visible is not.” (Nasr, 2006).

The Eye of Providence, Aachen Cathedral, Germany

Over the centuries, Desert Fathers, Gnostics, and Mystics alike further reported experiences of the inner sense as an inner eye or eye of the heart or soul. Since the early modern period, Western esoterics and scientists interested in unifying the scientific and

spiritual traditions are trying to find a physiological correspondence of this inner sense. In recent years, for example, the inner sense has been associated with the pineal gland, based on scientific insights about the light sensitivity of this gland (Gonda, 1969; Crystal 2009; Eggetsberger 2009).

Meditation for the development of the inner sense

While meditating, many of us have come to know first aspects of an inner sense awakening, for example, subjective visual appearances, ecstatic feelings or intuitive insights. But if we want to develop that inner sense to its full bloom, years and decades of constant exercise are necessary. Anyone of us ready to practice should choose a meditation method that works directly with the inner sense or with its objects and function (cp. Lehnert, 2009).

The relation between perception, soul and pineal gland after René Descartes (1596-1650).

A good starting point for such a meditation can be found in the “Yoga Sutras” of the Indian philosopher Patanjali (2nd c. BCE). His eight-limbed path deals first with an ethical lifestyle as well as body and breathing exercises. These exercises lead to intellectual and physical balance – prerequisites for a successful meditation. The four stages of meditation succeeding one another are: withdrawing the senses (pratyahara), concentration (dharana), meditation (dhyana) and absorption or contemplation (samadhi). This meditation can be carried out on material or subtle objects (Desikachar, 1997; Venkatesananda, 2009).

Material meditation objects

Material meditation objects are perceived through the eyes, not through the inner sense, but concentrating on them can lead to awarenesses of subtle aspects. Meditation on material objects should support the inner sense or third eye in its function to mediate between the right and left brain hemispheres, or the two sides of consciousness, combined. It should make aware to us our right intuitive emotional side as well as our left analytical rational side, bringing them into harmony with each other. This may be most readily experienced by means of squinting techniques which have been developed likewise in Western and Eastern traditions. Two different types of squinting must be distinguished here, though: the letting go of the eyes (parallel viewing) in which the concentration point shifts behind the object looked at, and the concentrative directing inside the eyes (cross viewing) in which the concentration point is drawn in front of the object looked at, in the direction of the observer (Wieser, 2009; Cooper, 2009). The second type, which I call ’doubling’, is the type of squinting ideal for meditation (Tausin 2009).

The simplest exercise of doubling is looking at the root of the nose, in the tradition of Indian yogis. However, doubling can also be applied to distant material objects. Anthropologist and author Carlos Castaneda (1972; 1977; Tausin, 2006a), for example, mentions a seeing technology called “gazing,” which at first means to focus the view on an object, similar to the hatha yogi’s cleaning exercise “trataka” (Gheranda-Samhita 1.53-54; Hathayogapradipika 2.31) . Sometimes, though, it is combined with squinting, in which the practitioner moves apart the two pictures and thus superimposes two equally formed objects. The concentration on this superimposed object synchronizes the two sides of

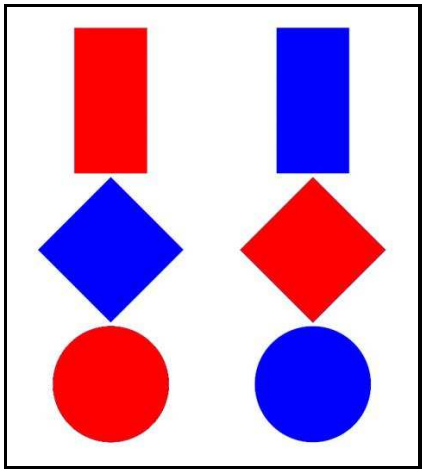
consciousness or brain hemispheres and, regularly practiced, produces a depth perception that carries the practitioner into other spheres of consciousness (Castaneda, 1972; 1977).

Another example of this form of meditation is the meditation on the “Tables of Chartres.” The tables are three legendary geometric figures of equal surface area, made from red and blue colored metal pieces, shaped as rectangle, square, and circle. They are put down before oneself in two rows of alternating color and shape and doubled until a superimposed third table group appears in the middle. The knowledge around this old meditation type was maintained and passed on by gypsies and published by the French author Pierre Derlon (Derlon, 1978; Pennington, 2002; 2009) .

The subtle objects: Subjective visual phenomena

Subtle meditation objects for focus can be emotions, sensations (Shaw, 2006; Sayadaw, 2009) and thoughts (Underwood, 2005).

For developing the inner sense, however, there are objects that are particularly well suited for meditation, which appear through the fusion of the inner sense and the visual sense. I’m referring to those subjective visual phenomena that are known in ophthalmology as “entoptic phenomena” or 'entoptics.' Entoptic phenomena are believed by observers to be seen outside of themselves, though, physiologically explained, they are generated by the observer’s neurophysiological visual system. Included are contrasting colored afterimages, colored spots and blurs in the dark (phosphenes), fast moving starlets flashing up (blue field entoptic phenomenon), mobile and scattered semi-transparent dots strands (eye floaters or mouches volantes) as well as geometric structures which appear in consciousness states altered by ecstasy techniques (“form constants”)(Chen et al., 2009; Sinclair et al., 1989; Tausin, 2006b; Trick/Kronenberg, 2007). Such entoptics were watched by people throughout recent recorded history, often provided with religious meanings and used as concentration and objects (Lewis-Williams/Dowson, 1988; Tausin, 2006c). The geometric patterns in the artwork of present and past societies that include consciousness altering practices and trance, for example, testify to this (Thurston, 1997).

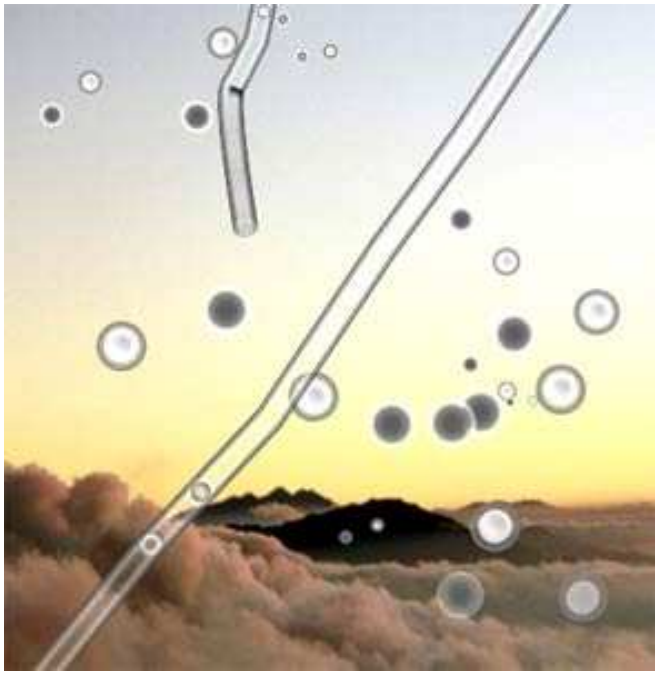


The Tables of Chartres (Image: FT)

Meditation on mobile dots and strands (eye floaters)

The four stages of the meditation according to the Indian philosopher Patanjali shall be explained now with one of these subjective visual phenomena: the mobile, transparent dots and strands which often swim in our field of vision and tend to drift away the moment we try to look at them. Many of us already became aware of them once in a while, and most people don’t mind, but some are actually concerned about their dots and strands. In ophthalmology this phenomenon is regarded as a harmless kind of vitreous opacity and called “eye floaters” or “muscae volitantes.” Sometimes the term “floaters” is used to designate all kinds of vitreous opacities, while “muscae volitantes” (Latin for “flying flies”) or its French equivalent “mouches volantes” describe the specific type of harmless floaters referred to above.

Seeing floaters provides a first-class meditation object to work with: these dots and strands form an individual pattern with each of us and therefore are an unmistakable expression of ourselves, like a thumbprint. We do not need to remind ourselves to carry them with us and can meditate on them whenever and wherever we feel like it. A powerful look upwards suffices to bring them to our awareness and hold them in our visual field. Moreover, the meditation on our dots and strands is an open eye meditation, which has the advantage to keep us awake and to provide us with the energy of daylight (cp. Tsung-tse, 2009).



Mobile transparent dots and strands in the field of vision. (Image: FT)

The first of the four limbs (Sanskrit 'anga') of the process of meditation in the system of Patanjali is withdrawing the senses. This means that we bring the objects of the inner sense, the dots and strands, into our field of vision and consciously look at them. Doing that, we withdraw our five senses from the material sense objects of the outer world and channel the energy usually needed to maintain our sensory functioning to the inner sense. In this first step we explore our dots and strands, get to know their forms, constellations and movements, see that there are different dots and strands in the left and the right eye or in the left and the right side of the brain, respectively, and we may then elect either to concentrate on the one or the other side at any particular moment.

We notice that it is not easy to see these dots and strands because they constantly drift away, mainly downward. Only by realignment of our gaze are we able to keep them in the field of vision. What we have here is a direct bodily-visual expression of what Patanjali calls “vrittis” – subtle waves or mental fluctuations which represent our mental reaction to stimuli from outside or inside. These waves prevent us from longer concentration because they produce impressions (samskara) in our consciousness, which in turn react to further stimuli. This realignment (also called fluctuation or modification in the Indian philosophy) takes place at different levels: every new thought, every feeling, every alignment of our gaze means an ending and new beginning of concentration. Thus, the meditation on our dots and strands always shows us how deep our concentration already is.

With increasing experience in seeing the objects of the inner sense, we reach the second step or limb, which is concentration. We will realize that we can hold these dots and strands in the visual field more easily and longer, and that they gradually get smaller, sharper and more shining. In several verses of his “Yoga Sutras,” Patanjali, too, mentions the perceivable increase of a radiant light during meditation that would, taken as a concentration object, lead to the knowledge of the subtle realms. This light can be seen directly in these dots and strands, and that’s why Nestor (Tausin, 2009) speaks of eye floaters as a “shining structure of consciousness.”

If we manage to hold the points and threads in suspension for some time, without realignment of the look, we have reached the third stage, the actual meditation. The dots only float a little and shine clearly. Our attention is now uninterruptedly focused on the dots and strands of the right or left side; our inner sense dominates and the five physiological senses fade from conscious awareness.

Our five senses rest completely in the last step, contemplation. The inner sense has woken up completely and lets us recognize and feel immediately and with great intensity the true significance of these balls and strands and their relation to ourselves. In Indian philosophy, this contemplative knowledge has a mystical quality insofar as the seer becomes one with the seen and thereby experiences the liberating knowledge of his true self.

In summary

To develop the inner sense or third eye, squinting techniques and the concentration on subtle objects, considered as objects of this inner sense, are suitable. The open eye meditation on so-called entoptic phenomena is a concentrative and 'cataphatic' meditation method (Underwood, 2005) insofar as it is aimed at the production and holding of inner images. At the same time, it is approaching the 'apophatic' insight meditation forms, aspiring to dissolve all consciousness contents.The appearance of abstract entoptics can be regarded as a result of the dissolution of concrete mental images and thoughts (Tausin, 2009).

A wholistic investigation on entoptics is beyond the usual reduction of these phenomena to their neurophysiological dimensions, as understood by Western medicine. On the one hand, the connection of entoptics to alternate consciousness states, as well as their suitability for higher insights, must be explored and elucidated by subjective comprehension, as with other meditative experiences and other subjective phenomena. On the other hand, humanistic research should refurbish the reception of such subtle phenomena in the different cultures and spiritual traditions. Understanding how other societies and traditions integrate entoptics in their spirituality, arts and everyday life provides us with new insights about the meaning of these phenomena so near, yet unknown, to mankind. By this expansion of the one-sided Western medical perspective, which is largely focused only on physical phenomena, and particularly on those that can be measured objectively, we can offer alternative thinking and action options to people who suffer from such subjective perceptions. This new way of dealing with these phenomena offers people the alternative to view and experience them as normal and helpful rather than as pathological, since they are outside the explantory systems of conventional medicine.

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