

**Acting On the Path to Awakening:
A Cognitive Exploration of Identity Transformation and Performance in Vajrayana Deity-
Yoga**

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The victors teach emptiness

To reverse the self-habit
Of those who have [nihilistically] turned away from all views
And of those who seek a self-view/ Therefore, it is 'the circle of a mandala'—
The method is a blissful binding—
Through the yoga of buddha-pride
Buddhahood will not be far away.
A Teacher has the thirty-two signs
And a ruler's eighty minor marks.
Therefore, you should practice with that method—
The method that has the Teacher's form.¹

Close your eyes and imagine your body seated in a vast, endless sea of clear white light. In front of your body, this white light coalesces into an intricate six-sided geometrical crystal field. From this field arises the red body of Manjushri, delicately seated on a white lotus flower wielding a fiery sword in his right hand, and a collection of the Wisdom Sutras in his left. Manjushri manifests as color and light, floating in front of you, wearing a coy smile and tilting his head playfully to the left. Now take this image, and reverse the perspective, looking at yourself from the eyes of Manjushri. Your body melts away into the clear white light of emptiness and from this space, an exact copy of Manjushri arises. Know that this is your identity and become accustomed to this self-image. Out of boundless joy, Manjushri transforms into clear crystal with a sphere of pure white light floating within him which melts him back into clear white light from which his image arose. Envision this white light absorbing into your self-image. This procedure is one of several practices of Tibetan Buddhist Tantric meditation, called Vajrayana, and utilizes creative visualization during meditation for the sake of profound transformation. Several prominent Buddhist scholars in the Tibetan Madhyamaka School, including His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama, claim that this form of tantric visualization, called

¹ Tsong Khapa Losang Drakpa. *Great Treatise on the Stages of Mantra (sngags Rim Chen Mo): (critical Elucidation of the Key Instructions in All the Secret Stages of the Path of the Victorious Universal Lord, Great Vajradhara) : Chapters XI-XII, the Creation Stage* Translated by Thomas F. Yarnall, Robert A. F. Thurman, and Paul G. Hackett (New York, N.Y.: Columbia University, 2013): 32.

deity-yoga, is a skillful means and a “shortcut” to enlightenment. Deity-yoga has its roots in tantra, as it combines focusing on both the mind as well as the body during deep meditation. However, deity-yoga is unique in that inner, imaginative visualization of a deity corresponds with self-identification with that deity, during meditation and after.

Vajrayana Deity-Yoga

The first known lineage of Tibetan Tantric (*Vajrayana*) practice anchors in the Nyingma school in Tibet originally dating back to the mid-8th century CE when it was introduced to the area. Until the 11th and 12th centuries, when the introduction of other tantric lineages gave rise to Tibetan schools of Buddhism, namely the Jonang school and the Gelug school, the school of the Dalai Lama, Nyingma was the only tantric school in Tibet. The term *Vajrayana* refers to one of three Vehicles to Enlightenment, the second Vehicle being *Hinayana* Buddhism, and many Buddhist scholars, including the Dalai Lama, refer to Vajrayana as the "Effect Vehicle," distinguishing this practice from the "Cause Vehicle" of *Sutrayana* or *Mahayana* Buddhism, being the third Vehicle. Many definitions of tantra exist, and debate among scholars for the exact definition continues. Indeed, no one characteristic is necessary "to define a text, group, or practice as Tantric; rather the inclusion of a number of descriptive features constitutes a text, group, or phenomenon as Tantric."² Vajrayana is loosely described as an esoteric Buddhist meditation practice that incorporates closed-eye visualizations and verbal mantra recitation to produce the effect of psychological and emotional change. Vajrayana is also best described by its aim, which is to develop humankind's cognitive capacities so that we may fulfill our potentials and become who we truly want to be. This mindset challenges our "unreasonably low opinion of

² David McMahan, *Empty Vision: Metaphor and Visual Imagery in Mahayana Buddhism* (New York: Psychology Press, 2002), 162.

human potential by showing us how to view ourselves and all others as transcendently beautiful."³ It is deemed the Effect Vehicle because the effect or goal of Vajrayana is to become enlightened and embody the qualities and values of an enlightened being. The only difference between Sutrayana and Vajrayana is the inclusion of the esoteric visualization meditation practice of deity-yoga in the latter. Thus, Vajrayana, or more specifically deity-yoga, is claimed by Buddhists to be the means, performed through routinized meditative visualization, by which this practice is claimed to be transformative, as well as the goal to which one strives. Translated by Hakeda, Kukai wrote: "In a word, the essence of Esoteric Buddhist meditation is simply 'imitation.' To practice the *samadhi* of Mahavairocana is to imitate it through one's total being—physical, mental, intellectual, and emotional—like an actor acting alone on stage."⁴

Vajrayana meditative visualization practice is a form of skillful means (*upaya*), a useful tool to be utilized for a practitioner to achieve awakening in one lifetime, using the conventional image of a deity and simultaneous identification with the deity as the Ultimate Truth Body for a practitioner to come to embody the self-image of a being who has fully achieved enlightenment. This deity-yoga practice is a stage-based meditation in which one meditates on the Buddha's Form Body (*rupakaya*) as similar in aspect to a Buddha's Truth Body (*dharmakaya*), and come to know and embody this through routinized self-identification (*samboghakaya*) with both forms as non-dual. During an elaborate deity-yoga meditation session (*sadhana*), the meditator envisions dissolving her phenomenal identity into clear white light and constructs and focuses meticulously on maintaining complex geometrical visualizations of a *mandala*, or Buddha-field, out of the clear white light. Along with repetitive recitation of verbal chants (*mantra*), which are said to facilitate visualization clarity, the meditator then visualizes a deity (*bodhisattva*) shining

³ Lama Yeshe, *Introduction to Tantra: The Transformation of Desire* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1987), 30.

⁴ Yoshita S. Hakeda, *Kukai: Major Works* (New York: Columbia University, 1972), 98.

like bright light displaying colorful adornments symbolic hand gestures (*mudra*), all arising out of the *mandala*.

While performing these visual motions, the meditator intentionally identifies her body, speech, and mind with those of the particular deity, in which a transformation of self-image occurs. These first two steps are the essential practices of deity-yoga which serves to "dissolve our ordinary conceptions of ourselves and then, from the empty space into which these concepts have disappeared, arise in the glorious body of a deity: a manifestation of the essential clarity of our deepest being."⁵ In one sense, the visualization of a deity and the recitation of mantra serve to occupy the faculties of mind, such as visualizing and hearing language, which stabilizes the mind. In another sense, creative visualization and identification with a deity is utilized as a tool, or a vehicle, to realize our true potential and inner nature through meditative cultivation.

The last step of deity-yoga is perhaps the most crucial for instilling a deeper understanding of Buddhist teachings, particularly the Doctrine of Emptiness, originally taught by Nagarjuna in his discourses. According to Nagarjuna, all existing things are said to be empty of all intrinsic or natural identity. When fully understood with clear wisdom, all phenomena are seen to lack any independent or permanent essence because they are inevitably enmeshed in casual processes of change. Additionally, when the essential nature of objects comes into question, objects can be understood to possess no intrinsic existence. Deity-yoga is said to assist the practitioner in realizing the Ultimate Truth emptiness, which systematically detaches her from attachment to the conventional self caused by ignorance and a deluded sense of false identity. However, a practitioner must be cautious to not mistake emptiness with nothingness, or an annihilationist point of view. The tradition is very careful to distinguish emptiness from nothingness. As Nagarjuna states, "'everything exists': That is one extreme. 'Everything doesn't

⁵ Lama Yeshe, *Introduction to Tantra* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1987), 31.

exist': That is a second extreme. Avoiding these two extremes, the Tathagata teaches the Dhamma via the middle way..."⁶

After constructing and identifying as the beautiful form of a deity, the meditator dissolves the image back into the clear white light from whence it arose. This last step performs the crucial function of reinforcing the constructed deity identity as a projection that is inherently empty of any intrinsic existence. The Madhyamaka School in Tibet interprets Nagarjuna's teaching of emptiness as containing Two Truths: the Conventional Truth and the Ultimate Truth. Simply put, Conventional Truth states that, "things exist," whereas the Ultimate Truth states that, "All things are empty of pervasive, intrinsic existence." These Truths, however, are said to be non-dual in the sense that they both describe reality, but an understanding of both Truths helps to liberate us from our attachments to the Conventional reality. The teaching of emptiness and the Two Truths become clearly knowable through mental envisioning during deity-yoga by identifying not simply as a deity, as this is still an empty form, but as emptiness embodied in the deity understood as the Two Truths. "[The] real purpose [of the tangible bodies] is to refer to the higher truth of emptiness. In this schema, the myriad practices for visualizing buddhas are subsumed under the doctrine of emptiness and the primacy of the *dharmakaya*."⁷ A deity becomes visualized, along with other mental imagery such as sacred syllables, light rays, and imaginary absorption of light and emptiness, during deity-yoga through systematized cognitive re-shaping along deep mental channels. The practice and results of deity-yoga evoke two questions. How can we come to understand Buddhist claims of the power of deity-yoga for identity transformation and what are the mechanisms behind such powerful transformations of identity? What are the implications of the claimed identity transformations on day-to-day life?

⁶ Nagarjuna, *Kaccayanagotta Sutta (On Right View)* Trans. W. L. Campbell (New York: Columbia University Press, 1919).

⁷ David McMahan, *Empty Vision* (New York: Psychology Press, 2002), 170.

Morover, how can methods of creative visualization and imagination be utilized as cognitive tools of stimulating positive change and healing?

This paper seeks to: (1) show from a scientific perspective how deity-yoga targets basal cognitive pathways to invoke insight and expand an understanding of emptiness as a basis for embodying the Two Truths during and after visualization meditation; (2) use the lenses of scientific theory that directly apply to deity-yoga and theatrical performance to understand identity transformation as an embodied act based on psychosomatic cognitive processes of self-identification with a self-image. These theories will also illustrate how deity-yoga works to transform one's sense of self just as human beings do in more secular contexts; by way of habitualized, socialized, performed behavior based on a fundamental role model, in this case the paradigmatic enlightened individual. Beginning with identity, the processes of identity construction within social settings can be traced to their cognitive and psychosomatic roots. Deity-yoga capitalizes on natural psychosomatic mechanics of identity generation to provide a skillful cognitive framework and pathway for identity transformation and realization of self-potential. As one embodies this new identity, one acts in the manner that is appropriate for a certain identity (role-play), such as a bodhisattva acting (the paradigmatic role model) compassionately and wisely for the benefit of all sentient beings. Acting in this way, in turn, habitualizes the role and solidifies one's construct of self-identity, in turn perpetuating the identity-related actions. The pathway becomes cumulative and snowballs with repetition, suggesting the transformative power of deity-yoga can become immense with time and mindful practice. But why transform the self? What is it about our identity that keeps us from actualizing our imagined potentials of the self?

The Buddhist concept of self negates any intrinsic, pervasive self, and is instead qualified as the illusion of self brought on by the five aggregates—form, feelings, thoughts, volitions, and consciousness—which accounts for our attachment to a sense of self. According to the Lama Yeshe's concept of identity, we remain attached to our phenomenal identities—our self-identification with our bodies—which causes us to suffer needlessly due to disappointment and traps us within a cycle of dissatisfaction due to an overly limited view of who we can really be. Under this mindset, human beings can become hopeless and fall victim to self-destructive desires due to a deep sense of inadequacy, based entirely on the attachment to a highly embedded sense of inherent existence of one's ego. To "see" who we can become, enlightened beings, makes it possible to become enlightened. To put it simply, deity-yoga seeks to train the mind to see and know that acting like a Buddha makes one a Buddha. The repetitive act of identifying oneself with a deity is of fundamental importance in deity-yoga, as over time meditators' self-generated mental self-images will become inseparable from that which is seen as the goal of Buddhahood. We can come to see every form as empty of intrinsic existence and manifested as mental projections that we have become psychologically shaped to perceive, but the practitioner of deity-yoga mindfully constructs her identity as that of a deity who embodies traits of an enlightened being. More than changing how we see ourselves through cultivation of a positive self-image, which carries its own positive mental impacts, meditative visualization practice results in lasting impacts on our perception of external phenomena, and how we can mindfully respond to phenomena to cultivate a deeper understanding of emptiness and embody the Two Truths.

Rather than produce a misguided sense of megalomania, such as saying, "I am a god and possess intrinsic existence," which defeats the whole purpose practicing meditative visualization

for the sake of seeing and embodying a buddha, deity-yoga provides a method for simultaneously dissolving our misconceived conventional identity and mindfully transforming our self-images into a form that embodies wisdom and compassion through conventional means, but is ultimately emptiness. For this reason, it is important to note that deities within the context of Vajrayana deity-yoga are not to be confused with what different mythologies and religions may speak of gods and goddesses. Vajrayana deities are manifestations of the Two Truths imagined as analogous in form to qualities expressed by awakened beings, such as Wisdom and Compassion. Additionally, visualizing such a deity is not the actual deity. The deity's form is a symbolic representation of a certain set of qualities that pertain to enlightened beings; an embodiment.

Using the language of psychoanalysis, "such a deity is an archetype of our own deepest nature, our most profound level of consciousness."⁸ Archetypes are metaphorical symbols of the unconscious workings of the mind seen as creative visualized images. The archetypal images are then associated with one's self-image, reinforcing the understanding that all forms are projections, including one's own form. "In tantra we focus our attention upon such an archetypal image and identify with it in order to arouse the deepest, most profound aspects of our being and bring them into our present reality."⁹ Practitioners of deity-yoga must understand that projections can be used as positive tools for change instead of impediments to the clear wisdom of emptiness. Our ego attachments and other psychological poisons such as aversion and ignorance must be understood and intentionally circumvented for deity-yoga to produce the results of positive identity transformation and deeper, more profound knowledge of emptiness.

⁸ Lama Yeshe, *Introduction to Tantra* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1987), 31.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 31.

To address the pitfall of megalomania resulting from misidentification as an inherently existing being, deity-yoga requires a level of understanding of emptiness, and pre-requisites to deity-yoga are explicitly listed. Fundamentally, a practitioner of deity-yoga must have a clear understanding of emptiness. Both Sutrayana and Vajrayana work to weaken attachment to the delusional sense of "I" by understanding the "I" as empty of intrinsic existence, and all forms are merely conventionally true because their forms occupy a dependently-arisen location in space-time, but emptiness of all forms is the Ultimate Truth, because all forms are impermanent and dependently arisen from past phenomena. The teaching of the Two Truths, as discussed by Tsong-kha-pa, is here a pragmatic means of explaining the Doctrine of Emptiness as a dialectical metaphor where two Truths, conventional and Ultimate, are both equally true but constitute as existents of a whole, non-dual doctrine of truth; the Two Truths.

Deity-yoga creative visualization circumvents the dualistic notion of the Two Truths and self-identity in the minds of Buddhists by activating our creative imagination for self-potential and training our minds to see egoistic identity as delusional and true identity as an embodiment of the Two Truths. The entire perception or belief in an independent self is actually understood by Buddhist to be imagined, or wholly constructed within the mind. As such, the function of visualization in deity-yoga follows along lines quite similar to that in the emptiness discourses. Rather than the displacement of all concepts through the negation of inherent existence, deity-yoga displaces visual objects in space and time through repetition of images of interpenetration of all phenomena, just as the emptiness discourses de-essentialized all concepts and "beings" by their lack of intrinsic existence. At the end of a visualization session, the visualized fantastical realms of the bodhisattvas become a transparent no-place, melt into the clear white light of

emptiness and re-emerge unencumbered by fixed boundaries, yet where visible objects maintain conventional forms.

Creative visualization, then, is a way of building up an enlightened identity after the destruction of one's ego/attachment to conventional identity/form. The practice and philosophy of deity-yoga are in this regard compatible, as even emptiness has a conventional form as clear white light, but an adept of deity-yoga will recognize this merely as a projection utilized as a skillful means. The "image" of emptiness becomes the space out of which "the mandala arises and into which it dissolves, or it could be understood as a mental canvas or screen onto which the image is painted or projected."¹⁰ The visualized fantastical realms of the bodhisattvas become a transparent no-place within a place, melt into the clear white light of emptiness and re-emerge unencumbered by fixed boundaries, yet where visible objects maintain conventional forms. The meditator engages in positive imagination, which affect her perception and identity in the world. In a phrase, "fake it until you make it," meaning one meditates on the self as being a buddha in mind and body, acts like a buddha on the cushion as well as off during daily activities, and becomes a buddha by a habitualized process of embodiment.

Image-Based Cognition

Psychosomatic processes of enactive imagery and habitualization of self-image are fundamentally important processes behind meditation and the transformative power of meditational practices like deity-yoga, and are subjects of intense interest and experimentation within the field of cognitive studies. A theory borrowed from the sciences (social, psychological, physical) regarding human behavior and identity in domains that are not explicitly religious can hold enormous explanatory power for the understanding of religious phenomenon. That is to say,

¹⁰ David McMahan, *Empty Vision* (New York: Psychology Press, 2002), 174.

science cannot posit what purpose any religious phenomena serves, but its application can facilitate an understanding of the logic behind the religious practice. The application of knowledge acquired through experimentation serves as a powerful lens to examine self-transformation brought on from habitual meditation. Moreover, the creative imagination seen in deity-yoga is a vital element of scientific discovery, as imagination and curiosity feed off of one another.

We can come to understand this transformative process of deity-yoga through the lens of cognitive scientific exploration, which involves a basic metaphor as the framework for hypothesizing and searching for answers within the unknown but glimpsed as potentiality via imaginative curiosity. In the endeavor to penetrate deeper into conceptual understanding, scientists, "presume some assumption, a basic metaphor, specifying the form that such an explanation takes—the world is a mechanism or the world is an organism or the world is mathematical."¹¹ Images in the world are especially metaphorically mirroring one's construction of reality and identity. Even if metaphor were abandoned to give a basic description of *what is*, scientists could not accurately construct hypothetical theories of the physical nature of the universe without metaphor, or describe *what might be*. For example, cognitive scientists use the analogy of a computer to describe the mental functions of the brain and paint a picture of the mind as an electronic machine that combines hardware (bodily faculties) and software (mental faculties). Thus, metaphor facilitates scientific curiosity and conceptual re-evaluation of the previously unknown, but empirical evidence in using science is bounded by the need for objectivity. As such, some of the most fruitful and insightful descriptions of reality depend on

¹¹ Earl R. MacCormac, *A Cognitive Theory of Metaphor* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1985), 52.

abstractions that are only indirectly confirmed through empirical tests, which expand knowledge within a field of research.

Researchers within the field of cognitive neuroscience have conducted in-depth experiments on the location of imaginary cognition within the brain—the site of image-construction/projection—in contrast to the locations of linguistic and conceptual cognition. The measured brain activity observed in subjects during different image-related cognition tasks (looking at pictures, asking someone to visualize, asking someone to imagine conceptually, etc.) showed evidence of cognitive locational differences associated with imagery, language, and conceptual thought processes. More importantly, during creative visualization (such as thinking about the question: "what do a cat's ears look like?") and conceptual imagination ("imagine that there is life on Mars"), cognitive activity within imagery processing loci preceded activity within linguistic and conceptual processing loci. That is, no matter the type of imagination, brain waves associated with image cognition occur before the word and the idea behind an image is cognized. This suggests that creative imagination is inseparable from mental imagery. This research supports the notion that imagery is a *sui generis* form of mental representation with distinct properties from linguistic or purely conceptual representations. The term, "image-based theories," describes this conclusion.¹²

Using the form of a tree as an analogy for the cognitive mechanisms behind creative visualization, the roots at the base of the system represent image processing, the branches at the height of the tree represent conceptual thought, and the trunk which serves as a connecting avenue between the roots and branches, represents linguistic cognition. The different structures in the analogy of the tree represent different locations or modes of cognition, but are illustrated

¹² Kosslyn, Stephen, W.L. Thompson, and G. Ganis, *The Case for Mental Imagery* (Oxford Psychology Press, 2006).

as organs of a larger organism in which all three are vital for a flow—nutrients in a tree or neural impulses in a brain—with the roots and images being basally located. As early cognition theorist, Paivo suggests, cognitive image processing can be viewed as an alternative mental pathway from linguistic and conceptual pathways. As Allan Paivo states in *Imagery and Verbal Processes*:

Images and verbal processes are viewed as alternative processing systems, or modes of symbolic representation, which are developmentally linked to experiences with concrete objects and events as well as with language ... it is assumed that chains of symbolic transformations can occur involving either words or images, or both, and that these can serve a meditational function in perception, verbal learning, memory, and language.¹³

Paivo illustrates cognition as sets of pathways in which thoughts "move" to construct frameworks of identification. These "movements" were largely understood to be linear as well as bi-directional, in which conceptual can become imagery and imagery can become conceptual along this pathway. For example, asking a conceptual question commonly elicits the construction of a diagram or a metaphor in the mind of the person being asked to clarify the conceptual answer, but, on the other hand, an imaginary image can give rise to more profound linguistic and conceptual knowledge. "We may form an image through one [cognitive] process and comprehend the [symbolic] similarities and dissimilarities of the features of the metaphor's referents in another [cognitive] process." These two processes can "combine through a meditational process to form a single interpretation of the metaphor."¹⁴ The first example depicts a "top-down" function of cognition whereas the second example depicts a "bottom-up" function of cognition. Neuro-cognitive experiments done using electroencephalography (EEG)

¹³ Allan Paivo, *Imagery and Verbal Processes* (University of Michigan: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971), 8.

¹⁴ Earl R. MacCormac, *A Cognitive Theory of Metaphor* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1985), 142.

mapping¹⁵ shows that during "top-down" cognition, or the cognition of conceptual and imaginary thought, image loci, linguistic loci, and conceptual loci all activate simultaneously within the brain. During "bottom-up" cognition, participants displayed sequential loci activation, starting from imagery, progressing on to linguistic and conceptual with a time interval of milliseconds. Thus, image processing can be considered basally located in cognitive processing and exemplifies a means of arriving at a sharper understanding of conceptual thought.

Concretization of Metaphor

During Vajrayana visualization meditation, a transformation of metaphor occurs in that the linguistic and conceptual dialectic taught by Tsong-kha-pa to explain emptiness, the Two Truths, becomes concretized in the somatization of doctrine in the mandala and the form-body of a deity which are visualized by the meditator. This helps to expand the conceptual understanding of the Two Truths by encouraging basal cognitive re-programming—from imaginative to conceptual—as a means of moving "beyond" what is unknowable to unenlightened beings. The metaphorical dialectic of emptiness—termed a diaphor—offers "the possibility of taking a familiar referent and transforming it by juxtaposing it with a referent not normally associated with the familiar referent. The combination of referents that produces a semantic anomaly, or a moment of cognitive dissonance, forces the hearer or experiencer of a metaphor " to locate the similarities among the attributes of the referents as well as the dissimilarities."¹⁶ Not only does "the recognition of similarities not seen before produce new insights or new meanings," but most importantly the identification of dissimilarities into previously unknown congruencies, thereby

¹⁵ Neuper, Christa, et. al. "Imagery of motor actions: Differential effects of kinesthetic and visual-motor mode of imagery in single-trial EEG." *Cognitive Brain Research*, Vol. 25, Iss. 3, (2005): 668-677.

¹⁶ Earl R. MacCormac, *A Cognitive Theory of Metaphor* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1985), 142.

ensuring a conception of new meaning in the experiencer of metaphor.¹⁷ Also, a metaphorical transformation of the practitioner's identity occurs as a result of Vajrayana deity-yoga due to routinized self-identification with the form and metaphorical meaning of a deity that incorporates psychosomatic processes of embodiment and self-identification. The meditator metaphorically transforms herself conventionally, body and mind, into a deity (recognizing metaphorical similarity) and realizes that she ultimately embodies Ultimate Truth (recognizing dissimilarity but potential for actualization), but utilizes form recognition as an expression of compassion and a means of coming to a deeper conceptual understanding of the Two Truths.

Seeing is a powerful and convincing way of knowing a reality. In deity-yoga, seeing is used "as a metaphor for unmediated knowing and the apprehension of what is commonly considered the unconstructed, non-conceptual truth."¹⁸ Deity-yoga emphasizes the constructive aspects of vision—opposed to the deconstructive aspects of the Doctrine of Emptiness to dismantle misconceptions of reality—to produce a clear vision of what emptiness is, or rather what it is *not*, to become a means of presenting the Dharma and representing Buddhist values in a positive sense. Like seeing an empty vase as the vessel of the Ultimate Truth, the meditator envisions the deity's form as a vessel of emptiness.

The Buddha is by definition someone who has perfected the vision of reality: a Buddha is one who truly sees. But when a lesser person contemplates the Buddha, the Buddha's crucial characteristic is not his own *seeing*. It is his ability to *illuminate* the minds of others who have not yet seen.¹⁹

Indeed, emptiness can only be observed with regards to that which contains it. In other words, we may only see conventional objects as empty, showing that discourses on emptiness and thinking about emptiness is merely knowing *about* emptiness rather than directly *knowing*

¹⁷ Ibid., 142.

¹⁸ David McMahan, *Empty Vision* (New York: Psychology Press, 2002), 171.

¹⁹ Malcolm Eckel, *To See The Buddha* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992): 139

emptiness. In this sense, seeing is synonymous with directly knowing in Buddhist tradition. Many sensations provide sensory information to the mind, such as hearing sounds, but knowledge via hearing, Bhavaviveka argues, is secondhand, and knowledge from thinking is entirely conceptual. To directly know something, we must see. To give Bhavaviveka's analogy:

Someone who gets rid of an eye disease and has eyes that are pure and clear does not see spots, hairs, flies, or a double image of the moon.

Likewise, someone who gets rid of the eye disease of defilements and objects of cognition and has the clear eye of true knowledge does not see anything at all.²⁰

enlightenment in this sense is seeing what it is to *not* see in which the enlightened gaze penetrates the delusions of the conventional sense of self or extreme in the direction of nihilism. The visual metaphor of seeing the Two Truths embodied in the image of a deity cuts through the problems associated with knowing via language and concepts and proposes a means of directly knowing via seeing.

Since, the complex dialectic of the Two Truths is expressed linguistically and conceptually, they can be described using a visual schematic diagram (*figure 1*).²¹ In Mahayana emptiness discourses, this cognitive schema of the Two Truths is located entirely in linguistic and conceptual processing loci and the cognitive schema of Vajrayana deity-yoga is located basally in image-processing as the means of arising to conceptual thought. By supplementing creative visualization practice—the mental creation and focus on a deity embodying the Two

²⁰ Bhavaviveka, *The Verses on the Essence of the Middle Way* Translated by Malcolm Eckel (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992): 138

²¹ (*figure 1*)

Dialectic of Doctrine & verbal thinking/symbolism

--> A = unawakened conventional reality

--> ~A = emptiness (ultimate reality)

--> "A" = awakened reinterpretation of conventional reality via Two Truths

Truths— in place of verbal debate and logical thought, meaning can be understood from an alternative cognitive framework and produce a deeper conceptual understanding of the Two Truths and self-identity. In this sense, deity-yoga functions as a "bottom-up" cognitive mode of constructing conceptual understanding from mental imagery.

Deity-yoga is presented as a skillful means of alternatively explaining the complex verbal/conceptual cognition and diaphor of the Doctrine of Emptiness by concretizing the diaphor into a tangible visible embodiment of the Two Truths within a deity. As MacMahan states regarding the concretization of doctrine, "cognitive language is circumvented and the teachings that once had to be thought through with a great deal of ratiocination, verbalization, and conceptualization are present in images."²² The reasoning behind this relies on the Two Truths. Ultimately, the deity is an empty projection visualized within the mind of the meditator. Conventionally speaking, the deity, motivated by compassion, manifests and imbues the practitioner with the white light of emptiness to solidify one with the understanding and form of emptiness. At the end of any visualization meditation session, the deity who arose out of clear white light is dissolved back by the clear white light of emptiness, returning the Conventional Truth of the deity and the meditators self-image to the reality of the Ultimate Truth of emptiness. Using a schematic diagram again, the Two Truths are represented in imagery (*figure 2*).²³

²² Ibid., 176.

²³ (*figure 2*)

Movement to image construction/projection & visual metaphor

--> (A) = the presentation of one object in finite space and time

--> (~A) = the negation of that visualized object as a permanent, independent entity by its multiplication throughout the cosmos and its simultaneous containment of the cosmos

--> ("A") = the assertion of all objects as conventional projections, ultimately empty of intrinsic existence, utilized as skillful means for the cultivation of enlightenment

Somatization of Doctrine

In the first model of the dialectic of emptiness, deity-yoga shifts the linguistic/conceptual diaphor of the Two Truths to a visual analogy of emptiness seen in the second model, embodied as white light out of which a deity arises, and devised as a cognitive visual pathway of identifying as an embodiment of the Two Truths by means of imagining oneself as divine. Unawakened conventional reality (A) shifts to the presentation of visual forms and the conventional nature of these forms. Ultimate reality, or emptiness (~A), shifts to a visual representation of an object as melting into or arising out of the clear white light of emptiness, the image of emptiness, embodied by enjoyment. Lastly, an understanding of both conventional and ultimate truths ("A") shifts to a visible non-dual manifestation of both during deity-yoga, where a deity arises out of the clear white light of emptiness, manifests as a visualized projection of light, color, sound, and bodily form, and is dissolved back into this clear white light, re-embodying the non-duality of the diaphor of the Two Truths in one visual form. We can comprehend a metaphor through language or logic, but, as Mac Cormac says, "sometimes the comprehension of a metaphor depends on a visual image rather than on a linguistic understanding of the referents."²⁴ Deity-yoga transforms the means of arriving at a conceptual understanding by bringing the meditative focus down to the basal level of imagery and uses this basal cognition to build up an abstract concept as a form that can then be identified with habitually by the practitioner.

The somatization of Buddhist philosophy shows an attempt by Buddhists to translate doctrine so as to make them accessible and relatable, translating Buddhist themes "into the more

²⁴ Earl R. MacCormac, *A Cognitive Theory of Metaphor* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1985), 144.

immediately accessible language of gesture, symbol, and image." Virtually every visible feature of the deity and his or her surroundings represents "a sign pointing to a Buddhist teaching."²⁵ Since image-based thought is located basally in cognitive functioning, it provides a procedural framework for a somatization of the Two Truths in deity yoga. Deity-yoga trains the mind to "see" what is considered the highest manifestation of emptiness, the verbal dialectic of the Two Truths, expressed visually and embodied as a deity inhabiting a mandala, and trains the meditator to self-identify with a deity and achieve Buddhahood. The results of identity transformation and enlightenment are difficult to achieve, but deity-yoga serves as a skillful means of transforming the mind to see enlightenment as a possibility in a self-image.

Robert Verbrugge and Nancy McCarrell conducted studies of metaphorical comprehension in which subjects were told a word and prompted to give a related image metaphor.²⁶ They concluded that metaphorical comprehension required a novel schematization, or cognitive re-analysis due to cognitive dissonance, of the topic and metaphorical vehicle (word, image). "Metaphor invites pretending, imagining, reasoning by analogy; in its more powerful forms, it requests a perception of resemblances by means of an unconventional reshaping of identities."²⁷ In order to form a novel cognitive schema for interpretation, one must use imagination to "see" the issue or system or problem presented. Thus, visual analogy is a cognitive tool for problem solving and clarification of complex conceptual or linguistic thought. In the case of the practitioner of deity-yoga, the cognitive mechanisms of creative visualization are designed to reverse common misconceptions about our identities as being that of the ego,

²⁵ David McMahan, *Empty Vision* (New York: Psychology Press, 2002), 174.

²⁶ Robert R. Verbrugge and Nancy S. McCarrell, "Metaphoric Comprehension: Studies in Reminding and Resembling", Haskins Laboratories Status Report on Speech Research, SR—53, (January-March 1978): 121.

²⁷ Earl R. MacCormac, *A Cognitive Theory of Metaphor* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1985), 144.

“that reality is what is and mental imagery is a derivation from this reality.”²⁸ Deity-yoga shows a path of visualizing oneself as what one *could be*, and that reality is very much affected by how we construct it mentally.

Identity reconstruction during the practice of deity-yoga is not simply imaginative, but an active process that leads to habitualized identity actualization. Creative visualization provides the basal cognitive framework for identity reconstruction, but self-image potential precedes action in this sense, and imagery itself is an active process described as an enactive theory of imagery. Thus, by the transformative powers of visualizing herself as a deity, “the practitioner herself becomes a living icon, as actuality follows imagery.”²⁹ Enactive theories of imagery depend on the idea that perception is not mere passive receptivity (or even receptivity plus inner processing), but a form of action, something *done* by the organism.³⁰ The perceiving organism is not merely registering but exploring and asking questions of its environment actively and intentionally—though not necessarily with conscious volition—seeking out the answers in the sensory stimuli that surround it. That is, image cognition involves perception and the act of creative visualization meditation involves elements of perception but both utilize sensory motor functions, supporting the argument that the cognitive processes of constructing self-image and identity are psychosomatic in origin.

Psychosomatic Identity (Re)Construction

²⁸ David McMahan, *Empty Vision* (New York: Psychology Press, 2002), 181.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 181.

³⁰ Thomas 1999b, 2014 §5; Ellis, 1995; O’Regan & Noë, 2001; Findlay & Gilchrist, 2003; Noë 2004, 2009; Land & Tatler, 2009; O’Regan, 2011.

Enactive theories of imagery combine elements of motor functioning and mental cognition into an inclusive psychosomatic concept of imagery and self-image construction. That is, not only are we identified by what we see ourselves as, but our motor functions (our bodily movements and actions) have an inseparable connection with cognition showing that we are identified by what we do as much as what we see ourselves as. The Cognitive Theory of Metaphor and enactive theories of imagery are important for understanding how habitualization fits into deity-yoga creative visualization meditation. We have imagery of, say, a cat, when we go through the motions of looking at something and determining that it is a cat, even though there is no cat, and perhaps nothing relevant at all, there to be seen, but the motor mechanisms and the mental image occur simultaneously.³¹ Likewise, we construct imagery of our identities, or self-images, and this evokes a sense of what that image *does* and of what the image *means* through its action and potential for actualization. Thus, for self-identification, self-image, action, and the combined imagined potential are fundamental building blocks. Vajrayana deity-yoga targets these specific psychosomatic processes for as a means for metaphorical clarification, self-transformation, and enlightenment, but because it is deemed the Effect Vehicle, the means to an enlightened sense of being is itself the effect, understood as cognitively useful "bottom-up" psychosomatic pathway of identity realization. How then, do these processes become actualized in a practitioner of deity-yoga? "The theory of socialization," and the importance of habitualized role-play as a means of identity construction, "is a useful tool with which to approach an understanding of how one comes to inhabit a specifically 'religious' reality."³²

³¹ Kosslyn, Stephen, W.L. Thompson, and G. Ganis, *The Case for Mental Imagery* (Oxford Psychology Press, 2006).

³² David L. Haberman, *Acting as a Way of Salvation: A Study of Raganuga Bhakti Sadhana* First Indian Edition, (Delhi, 1988), 169.

Psychosomatic processes of identity formation are rooted in basal image cognition and become actualized or solidified in as an identity through the active social process of habituation (termed socialization in sociological contexts) and routinized, paradigmatic role-play of a fundamental role guide or role model. The paradigmatic figures are cognized initially as images and utilized as vehicles of transformation "through ritual imitation; culturally established imitative activity transforms identity and situates one in the reality of the paradigmatic individual being imitated."³³ The identity transformation intended of deity-yoga can be described as a process in which the meditator projects an image associated with the divine and associates herself with this image, but habitually reinforces this distinction through ritual, routinized creative visualization during meditation, thereby transforming or reforming her reality from mundane to divine.

Human beings construct identities primarily based on imitations, habitualized actions, and projected self-images, which often arise as a product of self-imagining and routinized habituation of identifying behavior based on role-play of a paradigmatic individual. This process of habituation solidifies a self-image through repetitive role-play of actions, forming habits and shaping our identities. On the other hand, an image, or more precisely a self-image, has the capacity to solidify one's concept of self-identity that one adheres to in thought and action, resulting in behaviors one would normally ascribe to that identity. If habitualized action represents the means by which an individual constructs identity, it can be said that the identity is the effect. To visualize the paradigmatic individual or desired self-image and then habitually actualize the behaviors of the identity places the imagination of identity sequentially *before* the result of actualization. In this way, projected self-image can be understood as the means as well as the result of identity construction or reconstruction. This is the reasoning behind deity-yoga

³³ Ibid., 170.

being termed the Effect Vehicle, as this process is directly utilized in Vajrayana visualization meditation. Deity-yoga mirrors the active process of socialization in that meditators instructed to mimic bodhisattva in form and action, but posits the deity as a useful projection; a mentally constructed paradigmatic individual for the sake of imitation.

An identity or an individual's adherence to a certain identity can shape the way an individual acts and presents himself or herself. Moreover, the construction or recollection of mental image *precedes linguistic-conceptual cognition* of identifying or constructing metaphorical meaning about a mental image. What we see ourselves as provides a basis—the basal imagery or self-image—for the cultivation of conceptual understanding and profound knowledge in terms of the construction of our identities. Through routinized self-identification with the deity as a process of habitualization, the divine self-image becomes solidified in the practitioner. Deity-yoga does not simply train the mind to view reality and identity from a certain perspective, but actively engages the formative and transformative cognitive processes within the brain to shape individual perception of self-image and grounds cognition of meaning and identity within a reality construct of “seeing.” The embodied, active process of habitualization—performing mundane, everyday actions as well as meaningful or metaphorical acts as behavior of all type is largely performative for human beings—represents the means by which a person constructs, de-constructs, reconstructs, or transforms identity. More than what we believe we are, our identities are shaped by what we *do* and how we *act*, and cognitive imagery and metaphor theories, in combination with Performance Theory and theories behind human socialization, provide a means of accurately modeling the identity transformation in deity-yoga. Simply put, we are what we do. Thus self-identity habitualization process functions as a "bottom-up" process of becoming through action.

Performance Theory & Role-Play

Using cognitive theories of imagery as a template for understanding basal cognition, we turn to the processes of role-play habitualization and theatrical performance training as templates for understanding psychosomatic identity re-construction. Deity-yoga meditative visualization practice incorporates both cognitive processes of identity construction—"top-down" and "bottom-up"—and unites them into one method of identity transformation, or more accurately, transmutation. The process of constructing an identity within a social system is the process of socialization, but an important element of socialization is the process of habitualization of social behavior by observing and role-playing the identity of a "paradigmatic individual," or role model. Using the same schema (previously employed to describe cognitive functions) to describe performance and deity-yoga: (a) "top-down" or recollective acting uses a social model of the "paradigmatic individual" for a basis of physical embodiment; (b) "bottom-up" or mechanical acting, functions as a routinized, performative role-play of the practitioners divine potential that mechanically transforms self-identity through psychosomatic processes. Both theatrical performance and deity-yoga fall within these schemas of understanding identity transformation. As such, Performance Theory and Emotion Theory, which categorize identity and emotions and psychosomatic aspects of reality, are valuable lenses through which we can come to understand the psychosomatic mechanism of deity-yoga beyond its cognitive mechanisms.

Richard Schechner describes in his book, *Performance Theory*, the dynamics of acting and character embodiment seen on stage by audience members and actors alike. He argues that an actor who is fully invested in her role and her methodical practice of role-play treads on the edge between identities; the actor's identity and the character's identity. In order to train oneself to perform in this manner, the actor must become a vessel as well as the pilot of the vessel on

stage, making the actor the "author" of her performance. In other words, so-called "real events" are revealed as metaphors, made "visible side by side with the character."³⁴ Thus, boundaries between the two identities—actor and character—become transparent and fluid, and if the actor can place more meaning on a performance and is emotionally inspired to do so, she may come to fully identify with the character, or paradigmatic individual, and the experience being portrayed, if only temporarily. Simply put, identity is transformed on stage. But deity-yoga is not performed onstage, thus for the sake of comparison, the meditator performs the role of the actor as well as an audience member.

An actor herself may be considered an audience member observing her own performance and become moved in the same way other audience members are. "Like the other partakers," or audience members, "she can appreciate the dramatic situation, the crisis, the feelings of the character she is performing." She experiences the play similarly to audience members and simultaneously embodies that experience. In other words, she "will both express the emotions of the character and be moved by her own feelings about these emotions."³⁵ In turn, by becoming emotionally charged by the mood of a performance, the actor becomes fully invested in the performance and comes to fully embody and identify—if only temporarily—with the character she portrays on stage.

Deity-yoga explicitly prescribes performance as an underlying process of self-transformation. Second tantra referred to as the "Performance Tantra," proposed as a means of invoking a concrete sense of enlightened imagery and identification in the mind and actions of the meditator. During meditation, the mind is calmed and visualized images of the mandala and the deity are symbolically linked to ultimate qualities—such as wisdom and altruistic

³⁴ Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 128.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 356.

compassion—purifying the meditator with visual knowledge of the ultimate and how an awakened being views reality. While not meditating, the practitioner of deity-yoga acts in the manner of the deity, the enlightened paradigmatic individual, which accumulates merit and reinforces a sense of ultimate or divine identity—that of a deity. In the higher Tantras, referred to as Yoga Tantra and Highest Yoga Tantra, the conflicting identity of self (Andrew) and deity (Manjushri) is realized as a non-dualistic embodiment in the self-image of the practitioner as the deity. It is important to note the systematic staging of performance *before* the end goal of identity transformation. the staging directly mirrors the same processes of identity formation described as "bottom-up," in which the imitation or mimicry precedes identity actualization, but also "top-down" by its emphasis on the paradigmatic deity, thereby incorporating both processes of identity construction in its methodology.

Social role-play and aesthetic theater both represent performances of a different caliber and habitualization is a good model to describe actor training, but not all actors across the world are trained using the same methods just as different cultures have different habitualized behaviors and social norms. Two actor training approaches in particular—Kathakali theater in India and Stanislavskian Western theater—differ so dramatically in methodology that they can be deemed opposite in this regard and serve as good models for understanding identity transformation and embodiment of an "archetypal" deity-form.

Indian Kathakali theater is an elaborate, highly stylized dance-drama noted for its detailed gestures, well-defined body movements, and mythical themes involving Hindu gods, goddesses, and epic characters. What makes Kathakali unique is its rigorous system of body and facial training that trains actors to make exaggerated gestures and facial expressions based on the ancient Sanskrit text, the *Nayasatra*, which catalogues universal facial expressions and goes into

explicit detail on the precise muscle movements and facial expressions of actors performing certain emotions. This echoes with the Vajrayana emphasis on minute images and sharp visualization cultivated through methodical practice and meditation.³⁶ Although quite different, Kathakali and Vajrayana deity-yoga both focus on a cultivation of practice and methodical training, whether acting or meditating, as a means of transforming reality and achieving higher understanding, whether that is emotional, mental, or fully embodied. More importantly, both Kathakali and Vajrayana deity-yoga utilize psychosomatic processes, or "bottom-up" processes, of identity construction and cognitive functioning in the application.

In Western theater, Stanislavski developed a method of actor training in which actors are instructed to recall past emotional experiences that are similar or relate to the emotional scene they are to perform. An actor trained by Stanislavski would have been instructed to practice empathizing with the emotions of her character so as to understand what the character is thinking and feeling. It is entirely plausible that a high degree of emotional brain activity would accompany this form of acting since it seems that emotions themselves gives rise to emotional gestures, and that recollecting from memory an emotional experience would thusly give rise to emotional expression. Stanislavski is most famous for his emphasis on an actor's "physical embodiment" of a role, stressing that outer physical acts lead to the inner world of a character through a process of role-play in which an actor must train herself to *feel* the emotions that she is imitating while simultaneously expressing the imitated emotional gesture. He strongly believes that it is not enough for actors merely to represent a role (false imitation); they must live the role in the deepest way (true imitation). Leading to this imitation, however, the actor must study the script and focus deeply on the role such that the actor's mind is carried away with the reading. As Stanislavski said, "there are plays whose spiritual essence is so deeply embedded that it takes

³⁶ Ibid., 322.

great effort to dig it out.”³⁷ It is important to note that an actor in Western theater stays "in character" in between shootings of a movie or scenes of a play so as to fully become the character she means to "physically embody," and that full identity transformation is entirely ideal. Likely, transformation occurs only temporally, being better described as a blurring of the boundaries between identities rather than full transformative embodiment.

Ekman's Study

The two acting frameworks differ fundamentally in the means of achieving precise, moving performances. The Stanislavskian method, or "recollective" acting, uses emotional thought as the means of producing physical gestures and expression that properly imitate the character and embody the role. This method represents a top-down, from emotional/cognitive recollection to physical embodiment, method of identity construction. In Kathakali theater, actors are trained using an opposite method; methodically trained expressions and defined gestures give rise to emotional actuality and physical embodiment of the role by means of mechanical, psychosomatic repetition of gesture and performance of the gesture. This acting approach represents a bottom-up movement from physical imitation to emotional/cognitive actualization and physical embodiment. In both ways of acting, actors are instructed to meditate on the script, visualize the scenes, and imitate the character or paradigmatic individual with much time and care, but they differ in the methodology of training actors for moving performances.

Furthermore, meditative techniques of visualization based on scriptural scenes are a regular feature of the practices of Kathakali actors, involving visualizing the mythic world of *Vraja*, its various scenes, and its paradigmatic roles. As such, the modes of acting seem to be analogous

³⁷ Karl Jaspers, *Socrates, Buddha, Confucius, and Jesus: The Four Paradigmatic Individuals* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1962).

with modes of cognition within the context of deity-yoga, as creative visualization and mechanical acting are the means of achieving a physical embodiment based on practice and imagination.

Renowned American psychologist Paul Ekman is a pioneer within the field of emotions and has published numerous experiments showing the relationships between neuro-cognitive functions, like emotion, and physical expressions, like facial expressions or gestures. Ekman wanted to measure how different methods of actor training produced changes in brainwave functioning and how actors felt the emotions they performed, as it was believed that "emotion plays the largest role in providing the motivation for metaphorical creation," such as acting or the production of artistic expression. "Even the conscious intention to suggest a new insight finds roots in a strongly emotion-laden desire."³⁸ He hypothesized that the Kathakali mechanical method would elicit higher levels of emotional brain activity in actors than the Stanislavskian recollective method would. To test this, he employed "mechanical" actors from Kathakali theater and "recollective" actors from Western theater and attached them to an electroencephalogram (EEG) that was rigged to detect minute electromagnetic changes in the Autonomic Nervous System (ANS) of the brain, the location commonly believed to be where emotion is cognitively processed. The two groups of actors were all asked to perform the same series of highly emotional dramas and the changing electrical fields of the ANS regions of their brains was recorded.

The results turned out that the mechanical actors showed much higher ANS activity than did the recollective actors by a factor of two—meaning the mechanical actors exhibited twice as much ANS activity than did recollective actors. What is truly surprising about Ekman's

³⁸ Earl R. MacCormac, *A Cognitive Theory of Metaphor* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1985), 35.

experiment is not that emotional recollection works to influence expression (the results show that this is *not* so much the case), but that producing the emotion-prototype patterns of motor facial gestures resulted in "autonomic changes of large magnitude that were more detectable than those produced by reliving emotions."³⁹ Simply put, the mechanical method exceeds the recollective method in affecting an emotional mental state associated with the performance of a gesture or expression. The results show that emotion is deeply rooted in how we embody emotions physically, and motor functions of emotional expression are inseparable from mental-emotional feeling. Emotion Theory, posits that physical action and cognitive functions, such as emotion/expression and identity/role-play, are inseparable and fully intertwined.⁴⁰

Ekman's study has powerful implications for understanding and practicing deity-yoga, and how this can be applied to day-to-day life for virtually anybody. First of all, his study shows measured differences in two polarized processes of character embodiment and role performance that undeniably support "bottom-up" identity transformation as a more effective means of identity transformation or reformation than "top-down" identity transformation on an emotional-cognitive level. Secondly, this study shows how like in aesthetic theater, the product of deity-yoga can be viewed as the psychosomatic embodiment of the paradigmatic enlightened individual whom the actor/meditator identifies with through methodical imitation and habitualized mimicry; the paradigmatic shift. In deity-yoga, the deity (paradigmatic role model) also serves as the image-cognitive framework by which the meaning of the Two Truths is clarified, or concretized, for the meditator as being non-dually existing with the deity, thereby providing a somatization of doctrine in the form of a deity. Through an image-based cognitive

³⁹ Paul, Ekman, "The argument and evidence about universals in facial expressions of emotion". In H. Wagner and A Manstead. *Handbook of social psychophysiology* (Chichester, England: Wiley, 1987): 143–164.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 121

process of self-imagination, the identification with the non-dually conventional and ultimate form of the deity becomes second nature to the meditator. Just as the Two Truths are embodied in the form of deities by the somatization of doctrine, processes of identity transformation and emotional actualization are non-dually psychosomatic, and become embodied effectively along basal pathways of self-image construction and habitualized "bottom-up" self-actualization. As such, deity-yoga can be viewed as a meditational *performance* on a personal level instead of simply as a meditational practice that effectively utilizes our basic cognition of identity construction.

Personal Drama of Deity-Yoga

An actor reads her script and studies her role, practices her lines and movements, and performs which may blur the lines between her identity and her character's identity. Using acting as a template, a practitioner of deity-yoga learns the Dharma and the Doctrine of Emptiness, meditates using the tools of visualization and mantra recitation, and identifies with and performs as a deity to realize the illusionary boundaries between the Conventional Truth and the Ultimate Truth. During advanced visualization practice, the meditator imagines visionary episodes, as if looking through the eyes of a bodhisattva or deity, that constitutes a visualized inner personal drama, the effects of which linger following practiced meditation. Like setting the stage before a historical drama, the meditator constructs the visionary *mandala* (setting) in which the deity (character) arises, and as the visualization progresses, the setting and character become a personal historical drama, or "*tirtha* where the meditator meets a buddha in a symbolic, ritual recreation of the sacred encounter of buddha and disciple." In this sense, Vajrayana "sadhanas could be considered ritual enactments of these visionary episodes recounted in the sutras," or dramas of a more personal nature occurring within the mind of the meditator, observed by the

meditator as her own audience.⁴¹ As an actor imitates expression and embodies an emotional reality, so does a practitioner of deity-yoga imitate and formulate an embodied, non-dual identity of the qualities and symbolic associations of an enlightened being, thereby becoming an enlightened being by the very nature of action and performance leading to identification.

In conclusion, deity-yoga can be seen as a personal drama of sorts, in which physical embodiment is the goal, the bodhisattva is the character of portrayal, the *mandala* is the stage, the meditator is the actor and the audience, and the character's role practiced over time provides the means to achieving the embodiment. What might be termed the "self-performance" is practiced and becomes internalized by the actor by the very psychosomatic processes of habitualizing a role based on an imagined self-image. Clarifying these cognitive processes of identity construction pinpoints the effectiveness of deity-yoga as a basal pathway, and scientifically validates the claims that Buddhists give for the transformative power of deity-yoga. Moreover, clarification of the cognitive processes of identity transformation in deity-yoga and comparing it to other forms of identity construction/reconstruction serves to make this esoteric Buddhist practice relative and applicable in a number of ways.

Creative Visualization & Conclusion

In science, creative imagination is of fundamental importance in that the act of seeking logical answers to natural phenomena requires imagination from the start. The process of forming a hypothesis involves a degree of imagination to "see" what *could happen*. That is to say, an experimenter imagines the outcomes of an experiment and predicts a likely outcome based on his imagination. Imagination is also involved in the methodology of experimentation in that the elements of the experiment possess basic metaphorical meaning. For example, cognitive

⁴¹ David McMahan, *Empty Vision* (New York: Psychology Press, 2002), 164.

scientists commonly equate the functions of the mind and brain to the electronic functions of a computer. The experiment must have variables, which are symbolic, and a means of testing for the hypothesized outcome, which often requires a degree of imagination and creativity, such as the use of cognitive mapping to understand cognitive processes. The imagination is then quite useful for clarifying the scientist's understanding when the results are analyzed. The value of imagination within science is not limited there, as concepts and images in fantasy and science fiction have occasionally influenced advances in technology, healthcare, communication, and research by placing the image of a potential design into the minds of developer. these imaginative designs represent a psychological blueprint that can become actualized, which is in a myriad of ways applicable to self-image actualization and transformation seen in the process of identity formation.

Seeing in Buddhist tradition is utilized as a metaphor for direct knowledge of reality. Like the saying goes, “seeing is believing,” the Buddhist philosophy of emptiness and the Two Truths can become deeply understood by practitioners through the act of visualizing the somatized form of the Two Truths in the form of the deity. Indeed, it is almost unavoidable for humans to describe knowledge or information without the metaphor of light and sight. Sight may be the most tangible cognitive tool we have for greater understanding, and if imagery is utilized during meditation, the creative potential of ones imaged self-image can become actualized.

Creative visualization meditation and mindfulness can also be applied to mental and emotional health. For example, when a negative emotion arises within us, such as sadness, one might envision the sadness as a block of ice or a dark cloud of mist. Then, envisioning the ice being melted by waves of warmth and comfort emanating from deep within, or dissolving the dark cloud of mist by penetrating rays of light, helps to rid oneself of the negative emotion.

"Over and over again our experiences prove that it is our mental outlook that is fundamentally responsible for whether we are successful or unsuccessful, healthy or ill, attractive or ugly, happy or depressed," and with knowledge and proper training in creative visualization, we are given the tools to change this in a positive, constructive way.⁴² One might complain about a scattered mind impeding success and happiness. To heal this mental symptom, one can meditate on one's form as a giant, golden statue of the Buddha, then "imagine its heaviness, solidity, power, and immovability" to see oneself as immovable and powerful.⁴³ This is the process of creative visualization combined with mindfulness practice that has transformative effects on healing mental and emotional ailments. Although deity-yoga is a practice of visualizing a deity within a distinctly Buddhist context, the cognitive processes that deity-yoga targets are useful in a wide range of applications. This paper merely skims the surface of our understanding of the power of creative visualization for personal change and innovative thought, but shows that creative visualization does have a transformative effect.

The very foundation of the cognitive sciences is the analogy of the human mind to a computer—the mind is a synergy of “software” (psychology) and “hardware” (biology). Vajrayana Buddhists make this same claim and target basal psychosomatic processes to actualize a higher potential of self via habitualized self-image projection as an embodiment of the Two Truths. Research in the cognitive sciences supports the transformative power of these processes on an individual’s psychology, and provides the framework to examine identity as both a “bottom-up” and “top-down” process of habitualization through role-play of the identity of an enlightened paradigmatic individual. In the same way that creative visualization can stimulate

⁴² Lama Yeshe, *Introduction to Tantra: The Transformation of Desire* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1987), 14.

⁴³ Tulku Thondup Rinpoche, *The Healing Power of Mind: Simple Meditation Exercises for Health, Well-Being, and Enlightenment* (Boston, MA: Shambala Publications, 1996).

innovation through imagination, identity transformation through performance, and healing through visualization, deity-yoga, in this sense, can be viewed as a healing of the mind and self by empowering one's self-image and performing as a beautiful deity. The transformative power attributed to deity-yoga is a slow process that may take months or years to come to fruition, as many psychosomatic processes are gradual by nature, but the effectiveness of basal cognition and creative imagination have immense implications for secular transformations of everyday events and feelings. Visualizing concepts or emotions helps us "see" issues and changes more clearly, and deeper understanding follows with the aid of imagery, but most importantly, deity-yoga shows us that identity is *entirely* constructed, empty of intrinsic existence, and through mindful re-evaluation of our projected identities we can come to realize the infinite potential of self. We are limited by our expectations, therefore we must reach beyond what we mistakenly see to dissolve our attachments to the self and forge an enlightened identity.

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