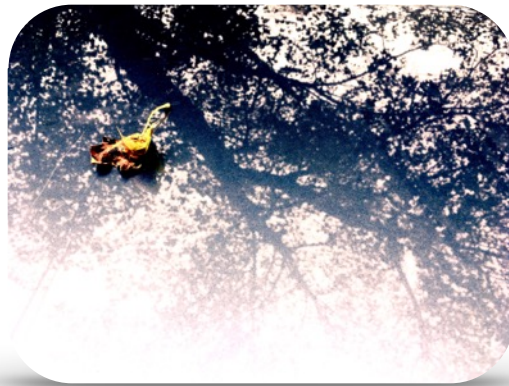


Waking Up: An Exploration of Filmmaking as Awareness Practice

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Dedication

To my first teachers:
Pat and Ivan empowered me with their love for the world.
VCTR, SMR, and KTGR taught me to see.

Abstract

This research study describes my exploration of the art of film as an inner awareness practice from the view of the Buddhist yogic tradition. In the initial pre-production and production phases of this research, formless Mahamudra meditations were most important. A camera lens was employed as a cue or reminder to practice the *lens of awareness* while capturing moving images. In the post-production phase, the creative meditations within Buddhist yogas became a major reference point: visualization, ritual practice, narrative text, and embodied energy practices. This present thesis-text arose as reflections and observations within every stage of the process, inseparable from the meditation and art, and was then edited into its current form. The research study included a series of meditation retreats with a schedule of visualization practices, formless meditation, mahamudra meditation-in-action, illusory body practice, and dream yoga. In between retreats the practice of lens art and meditation continued as a walking-photography practice. The final stages of the research process centered around work in the post-production studio: editing film into timelines using improvisation and chance operation. Improvised music and sound design were then woven into the fabric of the video edit. Two films linked here, [Dreamsign](#) and [HoloFractals](#), artifacts of this process, are included through various links in this thesis-text. All [blue text](#) in this document is linked to these films, or fragments of these films. The research questions of this study include: In what ways can contemplative film practice reveal and enhance the practice of self-awareness as articulated in the non-dual Buddhist tradition? How do the meditative and artistic aspects of contemplative film practice balance one another in different approaches to film? Current contemplative arts-based research influenced this research study from beginning to end. Connections are made between this research and the Vajrayana practice of sadhana.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my thesis committee. First, my advisor, Dr. Susan Walsh, for her constant eye on the big picture, her unerring nose for the genuine, and for showing me what I had not seen.

Second, Dr. Daniel Vokey for his many practices of *vast as sky and fine as barley flour*. And for his friendship.

I would also like to thank the numerous artist-meditators, who for decades have been paving the ground that I walk on in this study. You are so gentle, trustworthy, and surprising.

I would like to thank my family dakinis, Carrie Abresch and Gemma Rose Abresch Traill, for keeping me fed and journeying with me as insightful artists in your own right. I rely on your sensibilities as my chief muse.

Finally, I would like to thank the work of the many contemplative artist-researcher-educators I have met over the past year who demonstrate such courage, presence, and heart. You raised the ceiling on my visualization of how to show up.

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Chapter I

Introduction: Contemplative Film Practice as Inquiry

A mentor through my prairie childhood and teens used to exhort us to “fire on all eight cylinders.” He meant more than merely having your wits about you. Firing on all eight meant to expand your capacity in all things. To enrich and thrive. If we were going to be able to help the world then we needed “gumption.” The Midwest cultural mindset of the Sixties and my childhood required everyone to have a certain amount of self-sufficiency in the face of adversity. The generation previous to me were the children of the depression; they endured World War II, yearly crippling snow storms, and a new fear of nuclear destruction. From them I learned that, to solve the world’s problems, we were to cultivate our full potential, and bring that to the benefit of others. It is to the journey of cultivating our full humanness that I embark on this study.

In the late 1970s Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche was articulating a so-called secular path of meditation that he called “Shambhala Training.” He used the term “warriorship” (Trungpa, 1984) to describe a journey for cultivating the full potential of humans and the creation of a culture of kindness and wisdom more powerful than the downward spiral of fear and isolation many lived as part of the modern experience. In the early 1980s Trungpa Rinpoche suggested that a critical mass of his students move to a place where kindness and wisdom was already embedded in the culture: the Canadian Maritimes. I first contacted Trungpa Rinpoche’s centre of activity in Boulder, Colorado in 1983, did a month-long solitary retreat in 1985, and visited the Maritimes in 1986 to reconnoiter a

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possible move for myself. Trungpa Rinpoche had been training his students for 15 years or more at this point, and those student-practitioners brought their various pieces of this training with them to the Maritimes, and continued their practice and study (Swick, 1996).

Trungpa Rinpoche asked us to plant our collective energy in the Maritimes as ground to grow good human society. From our side we longed to practice a life with a vision of completely waking up psychologically and spiritually, and Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche was passing on a vast treasure of teachings on “waking up.” Shambhala, as a social vision, is a society where everyone is able to awaken to their own life force and goodness.

In the spirit of committing to and becoming involved in the culture, many ventures, institutions, and projects arose from the students of Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche. Those students, including myself, were generally haunted by the burden or command of integrating these societal and cultural ventures with yogic practice and meditation-in-action practice. We had been handed the lineage heart’s-blood in these practices, and were asked to bring this training to the full freshness of whatever arose in our lives. As yogins-in-training we were coming to understand that much of our personal energy was tied up in maintaining an illusion of our separateness from the life teeming around us. The more our conceptual fixations and emotional reservations were released, the more personal inquiry and self-awareness we glimpsed, the more gumption we had for riding the ups and downs of the world. Trungpa Rinpoche preferred the term *windhorse* to

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describe a universally accessible vitality that allows us to ride the flow of whatever arises in phenomena rather than being ridden by phenomena (Trungpa, 1984).

The work represented in this thesis largely developed from my involvement with members of this Shambhala culture. The culture of Shambhala is very broad and inclusive: a mix of eastern and western philosophical and religious traditions that serve a social vision beyond notions of secular and sacred, both ancient, fully modern, and inclusive of all people (Mipham, 2013). More specifically, the Buddhist training we engaged in was extensive and challenging: long group retreats, solitary “sealed” retreats, complete openness practice, pure perception, windhorse practice, awareness-emptiness and luminosity-emptiness practice, subtle body practice, dream yoga, fire offerings, illusory body, warrior practice, and on and on. It included the vast field of knowledge of the Annutara Yoga Tantra, Mahamudra, and Maha Ati: richness that cuts through cultures and time. I have narrowed the central lens of this study to the higher Buddhist yogas, including Mahamudra (Dorje, 2001), and Maha Ati (Gyamtso, 1995). Broadly speaking these yogas can also be called the “path of warriorship” as they are dedicated to the universal human capacity to transcend aggression through the noble qualities of confidence, compassion, discipline, and awareness.

Dharma Art

The artistic vision of this thesis is heavily inspired by “dharma art,” a term first used by Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche. Dharma art was largely developed by Trungpa Rinpoche as a visual art practice, but in my view it is a universal approach to all art forms, including

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the folksy art of arranging objects in our living spaces. Dharma art requires a certain touch on your world—a gentleness that allows a person to let the world in. Each moment, each perception in our everyday life is seen as art. It is art as a meditative discipline of pure perception, gentleness, and sensitivity to whatever arises, thereby opening the practitioner to a basic uncontrived psychological space (Trungpa, 2008a, p. 2). As you will see, art and meditation, artist and meditator, are blended in dharma art. Any art medium can be practiced as a dharma art: typically an artist aligns themselves to the present moment with a practice of sitting meditation, and then brings that sensibility for being and knowing to the activity of making art. Also, a meditator can practice dharma art as a practice of perception, both on the meditation cushion and off. It activates the intuition and felt sense. It is a practice of “seeing” without bias, a practice of unfiltered perception before concept, having an allegiance to total openness and authenticity. Many meditation practitioners within the Shambhala community are inspired by the teachings on dharma art and maintain personal practices of meditation and art in an attempt to capture an intuitive and non-conceptual perspective on the practice of living fully and vitally in daily life.

Expanding on Dharma Art

This thesis study of *contemplative film practice* is named out of my long personal relationship with integrating meditation, art, and education. The word *contemplative*¹ is a

¹ Contemplations are also specific Buddhist practices. Later in this chapter I define these practices as a style of meditation that mixes concepts with sitting and body-breath awareness.

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broad term for this kind of integration. As such it really can stand for an approach to life—to meditation, ritual, art-making, writing, teaching, and running a household or business.

A recurring theme in my teaching career has been to explore education as a path of awakening through arts and meditation. Making art brought attention and insight to what was arising in my outer experience and inner awareness. What I thought insightful I brought out in the classroom. Sometimes it caught a spark with students and sometimes not. I followed my own insight and developed my own practice. When I felt a genuine unfolding in myself as part of this art-meditation inquiry, I brought that to the students. First and foremost this is my practice, my longing to wake up to being fully human. At a bottom line I want students to see me walk the path of genuineness as best I can.

This thesis is, in part, a personal inquiry, a self-study, in bringing together yogic practice, art and music practice, and education, into the fabric of daily life. It is the command of our teachers to model our training wherever we find ourselves in society. The film and text that follow express what I have been doing with that training. May that expression somehow influence the sacred vocation of waking up our society to its inherent kindness and wisdom.

Differentiating Writing Modes

There are a number of places where I choose to depart from expository writing.

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Original poems, interspersed in italics throughout the text, are further identified by playing with the space of the page. My intention is to help the reader visualize a shift in the intention of the words and to visualize a change of pace and an increase in feeling tone.

On two occasions I write from an exposition-of-consciousness point of view. In this writing approach there is very little space between direct sensory experience and the concepts that arise from them, and I have right-justified the text to indicate a different perspective. In one instance, while engaged in film production, I track the content of my consciousness while editing video and creating a sound track in the editing suite. In the second instance I watch a film created by some arts-based researchers and, as the experience unfolds, I write what arises in my mind. The intent of capturing the spontaneity of words and ideas as they flow within the moment is to stay as close to the fullness of the original experience as possible. This fullness includes thoughts, inner physical sensations, memories, gaps in the continuity of the experience, and the sense of watcher tracking the whole thing.

A Few Terms

I have already cited the teachings and practices of **Mahamudra**, (great symbol) and, **Maha Ati** (great completion). From the view of the Vajrayana Buddhist tradition, often referred to as Buddhist Tantra, these can be simply understood as the most direct, simple, subtle, and formless of practices. They are more akin to purely being without

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contrivance. Practitioners of mahamudra and maha ati, though an observer would likely not notice any external cues as such, are referred to as “yogins.”

In my life and throughout this work I self-identify as a “householder yogin.” In the Shambhala Tradition we practice the inner yogas largely within the context of family and society. Throughout the history of Buddhism this is a well-tread yogic lifestyle and spiritual path. A few other terms need some introduction, as some are closely related to each other, and others are used with more precision in this research.

Vajrayana: In Sanskrit “vajra” means indestructible or diamond-like. Yana means vehicle or path. Mahamudra is a formless meditation within the Vajrayana tradition. Vajrayana practice may also involve meditations on form: for instance, visualization practice and mantras. Those who train together in Vajrayana practices, particularly under the guidance of a particular teacher and lineage are called, “vajra brothers and vajra sisters,” and have a great deal of trust and reliance for each other.

Tantra: Tantra is also a Sanskrit term meaning “continuity.” I use this term as little as possible because the North American popular yoga movement liberally uses the term to refer to anything hinting at spiritual sexuality. In Buddhism, tantra is almost synonymous with “Vajrayana.” The seminal texts of the Vajrayana are called tantras. The practice texts of the Vajrayana are often found within the Tantras. The “continuity” of Tantra will be referred to many times in the pages that follow as the unceasing flow of energy that arises from unborn space.

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Yogin: Both Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso Rinpoche and The Nalanda Translation Committee (M. Nowakowski, personal communication, August 22, 2017) use the Sanskrit term, “yogin,” to indicate a gender-neutral substitute for “yogi” and “yogini” which are male and female yoga practitioners. In this study a yogin is synonymous with a practitioner of Mahamudra, but yogin also includes visualization practice, mantra, and working with energy in the form of Vajrayana or tantric deities.²

Practitioner: I also use the term “practitioner.” This means “practitioner of the yogas.” In this work it refers to someone who “practices” by tuning into, flashing into, opening into awareness-emptiness, big mind or energetically potent space in all situations in life.

Awareness: This term is shorthand for “awareness-emptiness.” It means a non-local vivid cognizance free of a cognizer and something being cognized.

In apparent contradiction, it also called “**self-awareness**” because it is awareness that is aware of itself, or “awareness settled within itself.”

There are many English synonyms for this non-conceptual knowing.

Wisdom

Mind-itself

The natural state

The expanse of space (Gyamtso, 1995, p. 51)

True nature of mind

² Perhaps the most well-known Vajrayana deity is Avalokiteshvara (in Sanskrit), Chenrezi (in Tibetan), and Kuan Yin (in Chinese) (Khyentse, 1992). This is the Buddha of Compassion of whom the Dalai Lama is said to be a manifestation.

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Insight

Innate mind essence

Ordinary mind

Luminosity-Emptiness

Empty cognizance

The View: Non-Dual Space, and Unceasing Energy

The work I am doing aspires to embody the view of the Mahamudra and Maha Ati traditions of Buddhism. As such it is important to start with the notion of “emptiness” which characterizes how things exist. The philosophical view of emptiness in the Buddhist tradition exhorts the practitioner to investigate all aspects of life, through logical analysis and meditative experience, for evidence of how “things” exist. What is the nature of phenomena, and the sense of self and other? If we live in a way that is in accord with the way things truly are, then we release a lot of struggle in our relationship with life. And things are truly impermanent.

In my experience as a meditation instructor it is common for practitioners to notice a great deal of change in their experience. Things have no solidity. In Madhyamikan language they are empty of solidity (Gyatso, 1995). There is no “thing” there from one moment to the next that is the same. Existence, whatever else it might be, is certainly an unstable thing. Our body changes, our mind is constantly shifting, accessing different senses, dreaming, and grappling conceptually to figure things out. We are a flow of heat, water, air, matter, and bacteria.

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Also, the names we give for things do not generally acknowledge this flow. My own concepts fool me into thinking that the phenomena of life have their own inherent existence apart from the play of multiple interdependent conditions and energies. Somewhere in the process of conceptualizing everything, we start believing that “I” am “in here” (people generally point to their skull), and everything else is “other” and “out there.” We act like our thoughts, our lives, our personalities, are solid and permanent, rather than temporary appearances. We live within a complex set of nested dualities, concepts that split our experience artificially into me and my environment, things being “for me” and “against me,” past and future.

The Buddhist view is non-dual. The real way things are, including our own genuine way of being, is empty of our dualistic concepts. The tantric or yogic path asks the practitioner to disrupt this conceptual overlay and experience life directly as a display of light, form, movement, openness, dance, expression. The more the yogin lets go of concepts, the more life-force reveals itself, or is simply released from being tied up in fabrications.

Our life-force seems to be more of a constant flow, or a constant process than a solid thing. There is a lot of energy going on. Light, sound, thought, emotion, consciousness, gaps, perceptions, abrupt shifts, a riot of inner body sensations. A sense of our “self” experiencing it all. Different perspectives, frames, lenses popping in and out of the

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foreground of consciousness, and whatever watcher there is watching ourself being conscious.

Life is not so much a bunch of things bumping into one another in a big machine-like universe, but potencies, strata, fields, patterns, mandalas, living fabrics. Unceasing energy is always present in our experience if we are able to let go of our personal territory (Trungpa, 2003, p. 29). Holding this view of completely open, non-conceptual space and unceasing energy is referred to in the tradition as “the lion’s gaze” (Sherab & Dongyal, 1998).

The Practice

The everyday practice is simply to develop a complete acceptance and openness to all situations and to all people, experiencing everything totally without mental reservations and blockages, so that one never withdraws or centralizes onto oneself. (Trungpa & Shikpo, 2003, pp. 461-462)

The Buddhist tradition uses *meditation* in four broad ways, or you could say there are four threads to meditation (deWit, 1994. p. vi). All of these threads are ultimately about seeing through artificial fabrications and elaborations, dualities, of simply what is.

I. There are techniques for resting in the present moment. It is important for the attention to not be blown about by the occurrences of life, but to have some stability in order to observe and contemplate.

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2. There is formless meditation: the technique of no technique. This is the specific territory of Mahamudra and Maha Ati: being with non-conceptual wholeness of experience, resting in the mind's true nature, being completely open to whatever arises, allowing whatever arises to be "spontaneously liberated": "lhundrup" in Tibetan. The "longde" section of the Ati teachings expresses this true nature as "space." The brilliance of the moment that naturally arise as flashes of insight, gaps, sudden openings, energetic brilliance, all simply due to being human (Namgyal, 2001).
3. There is a *contemplative* practice, an approach to concepts and text that allows words to rest in the non-conceptual, meditative space of the mind, thereby understanding them in a fresh way (Mipham, 2003, p. 227). There are many words, images, and metaphors used in contemplative film practice that all point to unconditional wakefulness. I will discuss one example of this, *frame practice*, under its own heading in this chapter.
4. Finally, there is meditation in action, in which the first three threads of meditation operate within the flow of everyday life. This is the realm of contemplative film practice and other dharma arts. The meditative tradition encourages taking the practice and applying it in all activities.

Together, these four are central techniques of self-analysis, inquiry, and self-awareness that can expose the psychological filters and obscurations to our true nature. Practicing these meditations inform how we see children, understand human nature, relate to confusion and pain, ride the energy of the moment, have curiosity about other's views, and stay open to insight arising out of space. In the end it is our own self-awareness that models to our children how to be.

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In sum: the basis of our confusion is conceptualizing the ephemeral appearances of self and other as something solid. The practice is to constantly open when we feel we are solidifying. When we recognize the effect of our own self-interest on our experience, we open up to a bigger frame or less dualistic lens, a non-conceptual knowing. It is a sudden letting go. The yogin spends time resting within their present experience, watching, witnessing their perceptions, how they reveal the unceasing energy of the moment, or how they collapse into “me and mine.” But when “me and mine” are recognized as mere concepts arising like clouds in the sky, they are liberated on the spot.

Humans have an inherent, natural affinity for experiences of non-conceptual knowing.

- a squeaking clothes line
- a glimpse of your child
- a falling pebble from a cliff
- a feeling or knowing something about a co-worker as you walk up to them
- a satisfying breath
- a realization of your ageing as you look in the mirror

Before you think about what happened, there is freshness. Openness. And seeing.

Where seer and seen get a little fuzzy. Or, perhaps just forgotten for a moment. There is something bigger going on. A bigger space of awakening when awareness emerges from limiting, fabricated concepts. That awakening is not itself a thing. It is hard to determine where it is located.

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we are process, amazing
unfolding-in-the-present flow
sight, sound, feeling
thought no
center no
separation between phenomena
and you

It is healthy and empowering to relax our stranglehold on life. It is a big world out there. Gregory Bateson (1972) said the greatest task for humanity to solve was the error of separateness. We do not have to live as if “us” and “them” were true. The experience of non-conceptual presence in our life encourages openness, insight, and confidence in blossoming and flourishing as individuals, families, and a society. Activating this inherent human quality is the so-called goal of contemplative art practice. It is also its methodology.

The Approach of Contemplative Film Practice

The approach of contemplative film practice, as I am conceptualizing it in this thesis study, is to *intentionally practice this openness and awareness in daily life with lens-based art forms*. In simple terms, my practice is to incorporate a video camera into short sessions of awareness practice, work with the camera lens as a symbolic watcher or witness, then make art with the moving images.

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This awareness meditation continues beyond recording moving images and sound. It extends into editing an art piece from the media while adding layers of sound, music, and text. Each piece of art will explore different conceptual lenses: the play of light, the dream-like nature, the inner experience, sound, and silence. Some are more expressive with strong energy, and others consciously invite an audience to slow down and reach out with their sensibilities.

This thesis brings forth many contemplations, tropes, and cues used within the yogic tradition that resonate with the art of film. Later, below, I look at the process of this film practice through the traditional stages of pre-production, production, and post-production. First, however, there is one contemplation—indeed, a practice—that maintains relevance through the whole production cycle.

Frame Practice

Part of this work is exploring the relativity and malleability of frames. I use the term frames interchangeably with:

lenses,

filters,

witnesses,

watchers.

Frames and lenses are, of course, concepts.

Frames separate the world in the frame from that outside the frame.

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A lens is part of an eye that gathers and bends light. Each of us has a unique “bend” on how we see the world. We can put different lenses up to our experience, and can attempt to catch our own unconscious lenses. The point of playing with lenses is to realize that there is always a different lens. A bigger frame. The most common frame is “me,” or “I.” The yogic response to the appearance of “I” is to ask, “Who is noticing the appearance of this ‘I?’” For a moment you stop looking out your own eyes and glimpse yourself from a bigger space, or sphere of knowing. You let go of the frame. You see through a different lens.

Uncovering the relativity of lenses is a noble and well-trodden path to change. Anne Harris (2012) came to academia after a career in media and theatre. Using an ethnocinema methodology (intercultural filmmaking) she co-created films with Somali women in Australia about their diaspora experiences. She writes about engaging these women in filmmaking and discovering that, rather than seeing themselves through the lens of being marginalized and disempowered, they saw themselves as having agency and richness. The Somali women did not frame themselves as trapped by the prevailing cultural hegemony. They chose to move forward from the lens of their strength rather than their oppression.

The meditation lens of this thesis study involves questioning the nature of our consciousness and mind. Where is consciousness or mind actually located? Where do thoughts come from? Who is watching this life unfold? What is left if I stop maintaining this personal territory? The Mahamudra and Maha Ati tradition says that our awareness

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has a nature like the sky (Urgyen, 1999, p. 152). This is an important instruction. The ultimate frame is the sky, a frame with no center or fringe.

Frame practice can be approached in two steps: first, you perceive a frame, and second, your perception automatically opens up. You “flip” your frame to include everything that was not in the frame. Perhaps the sky. In this way the practitioner is always expanding their self-awareness, expanding their sphere of being, unfolding into a bigger space, instantly touching into their essential, unconditional nature.

Tulku Urgyen (1999) uses many sky and space metaphors when teaching meditators how to realize their own true nature. He says “Rigpa (insight) is like space” (p. 159). It has no center or edge. And later he says that “rangjung yeshe,” self-existing wakefulness, is unconfined and wide open. The confining, limiting factor is the fabrication of the subject and object frame or lens (p.160). The thought and the thinker are playful appearances, mere frames, in the big space of non-local awareness. In this way contemplative film practice plays with frames and lenses in order to see beyond them.

Why Is This Worthy of Attention?

From the point of view of Buddhism, meditation practice is almost useless if it remains the exclusive realm of cushions, gongs, and meditation halls. As in all sectors of our life, it is good to bring meditative awareness into the daily art of perceiving our world and the activity of expressing our human condition. Awareness and art can then mingle in a

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reciprocal loop: art shapes our culture which shapes our view of ourselves which shapes art.

When I contemplate the meditative experience of film production, I ask:

Does it help in experiencing life without centralizing upon oneself?

Does it help to relax mental reservations and blockages?

Does it facilitate an authentic inner journey of waking up to our self-existing spaciousness and energy?

Contemplative film practice may also have merit as others experience and contemplate the artifacts of the process. It is not about entertainment, but about waking up. The central allegiance of contemplative film practice is to the insight and discovery of being fully human. It has no external goal other than wisdom, self-awareness and compassion. The films to some degree should challenge our foggy, habitual relationship to our perceptions. They might invite viewers to reflect on the nature of the “watcher” of the film. To see their minds and phenomena arising in dependence upon one another.

Research Questions

- 1) In what ways can contemplative film practice reveal and enhance the practice of self-awareness as articulated in the non-dual Buddhist tradition?
- 2) How do the meditative and artistic aspects of contemplative film practice balance one another in different approaches to film? Non-conceptual experimental films such as those by Brakhage, discussed in Chapter 4,

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establish good artistic ground for the non-conceptual awareness practice of this thesis study. For example, how does awareness practice integrate with a more conceptual poetic or narrative thread, or a music underscore?

- 3) Where does the radical non-duality of the Buddhist yogic tradition underpinning this thesis resonate within and where does it diverge from the views of contemporary artists, arts-based researchers and thinkers?

The Content

This thesis is both text and multimedia. Two short films, entitled ***Dreamsign*** and ***Holofractals***, are the centerpiece of this thesis and are hyperlinked to the pictures below.



The films are artifacts of my self-exploration of contemplative film practice within the experiences of daily life both in the world of people, while on solitary retreat, and through the lens of the Buddhist world-view. The first research question is explored in these films as well as in the second chapter on contemplative film practice.

I have illustrated this text with pictures—screen captures—from the two films and from the archive of visual images created in the process of this study. When the picture is

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directly from the film, the text refers to a time code the reader can use to watch that portion of the film.

Chapter 2, **Portrait of a Prairie Boy Buddhist**, is a personal narrative explaining my long-standing search for a way of understanding my life, how that connected to perceptions of the world around me, my attraction to First Nations traditions such as smudges and sweat lodges, and how those childhood experiences resonated when I met Tibetan meditation masters. In short, it is the story of how I came to be doing this work. It is the part of me that resonated with arts-based research.

Chapter 3 is called **Contemplative Film Practice: The Lion's Gaze**. This text accompanies the film as reflections on the research-film-meditation methodology. It is organized into two sections that reflect the filmmaking process: Pre-Production and Production. Each section articulates the different frames used to invoke different meditation practices.

Chapter 4 is entitled **Post-Production: Improvisation and Auspicious Coincidence**. This chapter engages the second research question on how the meditative and artistic aspects of this study interplay with different levels of conceptuality and outward expression in the post-production process.

Chapter 5, entitled **The Power of the World As It Is**, is exploration of the third research question. It discusses the Buddhist Higher Yoga view of our human experience

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from the point of view of three principles: space, energy, and compassion. The chapter is the backdrop for non-dual meditation, meditations with form that rely upon an artistic sensibility, accessing a relationship with the living patterns of energy called “drala.” This is central to dharma art and contemplative film practice.

Drala energy also has resonances with dancers, performing artists, musicians, visual artists, psychologists, and some sectors of science community, and arts-based researchers. It was the work of current arts-based researchers (Walsh, Bickel, & Leggo, 2015) that, in the end, inspired this whole thesis study. I experience these people drawing upon a range of influences, often working at the edges of some fundamental taken-for-granted paradigms, seeking to expand the definition of research and how we know something to be true. The Buddhist tradition includes an expanded definition of research and how we know something to be true through thousands of years of yogic self-examination. It is important to me to triangulate different traditions of knowledge that, together, open up the possibilities for how we can understand society and be in the world.

Chapter 6 is entitled **Taking Stock: Reflections on the Artifacts**, and contains concluding thoughts and further questions on this study. It looks back reflectively at the films for further insight into the questions of this thesis. It looks forward into the new edge of discovery, or creative liminal zone into which this research could move.

Integrating the traditions of art, improvisation, meditation and research is opening up to lifetimes of work for me and for others.

Chapter 2

Portrait of a Prairie Boy Buddhist

Childhood

When I was a boy we traveled the roads, paths, fields and forests of the mid-west, mostly Manitoba and the Dakotas. The gravel was often rutted and would bang under the car. A cloud of dust would rise into the sky behind the car and slowly drift across the fields as we drove. I was taught to read the horizon. The prairie landscape was often a vast vista, the sky the most impressive natural phenomena. Between land and sky were subtle rises and falls, thin tree lines where the flat land dipped down around water, glacial features like escarpments and mounds. The landforms and biosystems evoked huge scales of time for us. We were active rock hounds and amateur geologists. Petrified forests, mineral outcrops, ancient volcanic rock formations, fossils, and dinosaur bones were all on our agenda. As we walked through the forest looking for whatever was to be found, we would name everything, every flower, lichen, grass, shale outcrop, sand moraine ridges, succulent, mushroom, igneous erratic, moss and micro ecosystem—which was both awesome and irritating. It made me watchful and knowledgeable as a school-age boy, but it also sparked my imagination. I knew that I was a dreamer. In “my own little world.” So to some degree our family practice of discussing the various Latin and colloquial names for plants and their herbal uses for settlers, discussing the science of the natural world, brought me out of the spacious experience of just soaking it all in. Still, these are very happy memories.

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I remember imagining and feeling the ancient relationship humans had to the land, yearning for that connection. Riding in the car I visualized what it would be like to live here seven thousand years ago.

“That would be a good place to set up a camp site. Water, shelter, good view.”

“Can’t you just imagine stampeding bison over that drop off?”

“That forest would provide great protection from winter storms. You’d have to move in the summer though, eh?”

We drove over pastures and fallow field in an attempt to get to a high copse of trees or a bare knoll with a good vantage of the surroundings. Dirt would clunk under the car chassis, tree branches scratching the windows and doors. I would imagine further.

“Great place for a camp site, and it’s not been in cultivation for a year or so . . . yeah, looks like some good wind erosion. Perfect place to find arrowheads.”

And find them we did. By the hundreds.

When I was a boy, on Saturday afternoons, we would visit family friends in their little wood-frame house on a First Nation reserve.³ The adults would smoke roll-your-owns,

³ My childhood experiences with Indigenous Elders inform and enrich me to this day.

However, I am under no delusions that my family took privilege in merely touching in on their lives, selectively associating with their wisdom lineage, never sharing the challenges foisted upon them by my recent ancestors. I humbly owe these people reconciliation.

After all, my life's approach to awareness and pure perception was seeded by my acquaintance with the culture of prairie Indigenous people.

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lighting wooden matches on the side of a black cast-iron wood stove, and we would show the Elders some of the stone tools we had found in the area. The Elders would talk about ancient burial grounds or when their families stopped being nomadic. Two or three of the Elder's families were nomadic during their childhood, living in square canvas tents with portable wood or oil stoves, traveling by horse and wagon and following the seasonal grain harvest from Texas to Manitoba. Usually someone would say how the moose and deer were this year, or report wolf or cougar sign sightings. Often there would be leather pieces on the table where someone was either beading or making moccasins. Every now and then we would come home with a little deer or moose meat.

I emulated these family friends in my play because they knew how to live by their wits. They could make a life out of seemingly nothing. They knew animals, shifts in the season, coming storms, dry humor, and quiet dignity.

Many years later, as a young teacher in Winnipeg I met Elders who held unbroken lineages as medicine holders and pipe carriers, including a woman from a two-spirited lodge, "Bernadette,"⁴ who became very important to me. I trusted her love and ferocity and tagged along on her friendships with genuine Anishinaabe power holders. The seeds of these experiences eventually became foundational pieces of my work as an educator. They also resonated and rose up in my spiritual life when I got more into Vajrayana Buddhism and Tibetan Indigenous world views and techniques for connecting with the elements, landscape, and phenomena altogether.

⁴"Bernadette" is a pseudonym used to protect her identity.

University and Adolescent Crisis

In high school and the first few years of university I could not figure out the point of life. Everything seemed arbitrary, fraught, and unfulfilled. When I was eighteen, in desperation, I thought about going to a Christian music college in Alberta. The students there seemed happy. I chickened out in the end and didn't go. Instead I discovered peyote, LSD, and read the canon of hippy lit, from *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* (Wolfe, 1969) to *Autobiography of a Yogi* (Yogananda, 2007).

At nineteen, after an arts degree in Anthropology, I was running heavy machinery for the Canadian Pacific Railway and wondering what I was going to do. By then I was reading Lao-Tsu (Lao-Tsu, 2011), Chan Buddhist sutras (Cleary, 1998), and D.T. Suzuki (Suzuki, 1964). Most of these early winter days were alone on remote, one-train-per-week railroad tracks in the Qu'Appelle Valley in southern Saskatchewan, operating a big diesel road grader. It is an arid territory. Wild, quiet, fragile. And big and open. I would return each night to a small motel somewhere for the evening, drink a few beer, and read the Sutra of Hui Neng or some such thing.

During this time a significant self-disruption of my habitual self-narrative came while reading *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* (Pirsig, 1999). In the book there is a moment of madness or groundlessness that occurs when Phaedrus grapples philosophically with Aristotle's role in the modern dualistic entrapment. I had never considered the thought that the duality of subject and object are fabrications, that inner

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and outer are illusions. I experienced an intuition that dualism was entangled in my confusion about the purpose of life, so I pursued this notion of non-duality and emptiness.

One evening, after a day on the tracks, something in these words-pointing-to-emptiness came through in a way I was completely unfamiliar with. At first it was frustration or an aching for something just out of reach. For the past three months or so I had been consuming the writing, stories, and analysis of the teachings on emptiness and non-duality. It aggravated a sense that there was something terribly wrong with the most fundamental notion of why we as people bother with this life's struggle as a solution to fulfillment. The utter futility of competition and gamesmanship to "be" something in order to be happy was a hollow shell of a life to me, but I had heard of no alternative to replace it.

That night in my cinder block motel room, after a day out in the scrub, sand, and antelope, I read D.T. Suzuki (Suzuki, 1964). He was taking the reader back and forth over why "things" (me, for instance) neither existed nor didn't exist, how nihilism and eternalism were both mistaken views, and errors in how things are. In my own language I remember the message as:

How can you claim that rainbows or people exist when you can't find them anywhere when you take them apart? Where is this person you speak of whose body changes and shifts every moment and whose mind is a constant dance of

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thoughts, emotions and perceptions? How can something that is so dependent on countless causes and conditions have any solidity, singularity, or longevity and be said to exist?

But you can't say that things don't exist! Look! Rainbows and people are so vividly present, colorful and impactful. There they are! The whole of the world arises fresh each moment in unceasing play. How amazing! Because they are empty of any inherent solidity, they are also full of life.

Whatever the actual words, as I read them in that motel room they triggered a physiological response that I later understood in terms of "prana." Physically, it felt like someone pouring warm water over my head and washing my body in subtle sensations up and down my spine, the surface of my skin, of heat producing a full-body hum, an internal flow harmonizing and settling. I fell down backwards on the bed gazing into the space. I just stayed in this completely relaxed awake space with nothing happening. Tensions I didn't even know I had in my body, mental blockages, conceptual blindspots, resolved themselves in this space. The moment was without struggle, no thoughts, clear, complete, full-bodied. Something had crumbled, and revealed . . . or maybe relaxed into something else.

I spent many years, probably still am, struggling to recreate that moment, that experience, that realization in that motel on the fringe of the Qu'Appelle Valley. Such mistakes are the nature of journeys, switchbacks, confusion in the forests. I invested

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more and more of my energy in practicing and studying genuine living traditions of this non-conceptual openness.

Improvising and India

After the winter of the motel in the Qu'Appelle Valley, I went to India for the first time and, though I didn't connect with a living Buddhist tradition until later in music school, I experienced a major shift in my own sense of personal power and agency. Music played a big part in that shift. For the first time I met people who showed me a new fearlessness in risking personal expression, and these people played music. I started inhabiting my body more, explored the boundaries of my sexual comfort zone, played music from a place of passion and proclamation, all weaving into a twenty-one year old adolescent awakening.

After that first trip to India I went to music school and found more of my "people," kindred spirits: musicians, philosophy and religion students and professors, creators, thinkers, and mystical wannabees like me. My musical career after music school included a couple of business starts and stops, many instruments and many genres. Somewhere in there I found my musical home as a multi-instrumental improviser. Improvisation has also been a theme in my teaching as well. Composing music, which I did professionally for 10 years, and is again a current practice, is for me about improvisation. Starting with nothing and dancing with what arises in your energy is also an awareness practice, so I associate improvisation closely with my meditative training.

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I ended up studying Buddhism almost as much as music in music school! As a result I went to India again and studied Comparative Buddhist Studies as a masters student for one fall term. During this second stay in India I took refuge with a Tibetan lama in Bodh Gaya. Meeting Tibetans reminded me so much of the old Elders of the reserve in Manitoba I hung out with as a boy. My childhood memories resonated with the Tibetan toughness, humor, and natural responsiveness to shifts in phenomena, and perceptions of so-called magic.

Buddhist Training

Since 1981 I have studied and trained under the guidance of many tantric lineage holders in Shambhala and other Buddhist traditions. In 1996 I became the Director of a Buddhist meditation centre and started teaching meditation throughout North America for the next fifteen years. I worked on different ways of mixing art, movement, music, and meditation during this time. The Tibetan meditative tradition I was teaching within also had an earthy, shamanistic sensibility, so relating with natural environments and the elements became an aesthetically pleasing part of retreat: offering juniper and other substances, the use of fire, visualization, mantra, and physical yogas.

Early on I became, and still am, compelled to solitary retreat. I long for a simple cabin in the woods with a high point of land from which to look out into space. For many years I spent between four and six weeks a year in solitary and some group retreat. Now, other than a daily schedule, I practice intensively for full days in a row just a few times a year and manage to get to a two-week group retreat once a year.

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The thirty-five years of Buddhist practice that followed have been a burbling cauldron of self-reflection. I still invest extensive time and resources learning about tantric meditation and studying the philosophical traditions of emptiness in Buddhism and how they relate to experience. My touchstone on this path is the aspiration toward continual openness to all situations, experiences, and people without reservation or hesitation. It is impossible, really. Nonetheless, noticing when you experience hesitation or fear in jumping into reality is a very powerful blessing, so as difficult as the path is, it generates tremendous inspiration.

And so went the early journey of myself as a Buddhist musician with aspirations to shamanistic sensibilities. Education is also feathered throughout this story. I think I can say the educator and the visual artist in me awoke together.

Teaching, Art, Elders

A number of people from three generations of my family were teachers. As a teenager I swore I would never become a teacher, but in my first career as a musician I developed a songwriting workshop that I did for elementary schools. There were usually a few teachers standing around the edges of these workshops drinking coffee while I worked. After a few jobs I realized that not everyone could command the attention of 30 plus children while co-creating melody, verse, and chorus to the point of performance and recording. I decided to complete a Bachelor of Education Degree and become a teacher, which would also allow me to do summer meditation retreats and programs.

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I taught school from Grade Three to Grade 12. Most of the programs I taught were either new burgeoning creative projects, or situated in strongly urban populations where creativity and openness to whatever arises is a prerequisite to success and connection with the community. As a young teacher in Winnipeg, during my friendship with Bernadette, I taught a vocational program in music production and performance. Our student musicians, actors, and creators were ninety percent members of the First Nations. Smudges, sweat lodges, talking circles, and four directions ceremonies were regular occurrences. While I taught students to create music, sound design and sets, Bernadette and her pipe holder peers and Elders provided a continuous living immersion in Indigenous spirituality for the students and myself.

Starting from my first days as a teacher in the mid-eighties I developed a life-long love for all forms of art appreciation and art production and taught and led workshops in art for teachers throughout the North American Midwest teacher conference circuit. Art making became a very high form of education in my experience. It activated the resilience and critical awareness of students. It was a very serious form of play, a spontaneous improvisation of form out of nothing. Art nurtures a person's character, confidence, and voice. It is training in perception beyond projection. In my view, there is something about art training that synchronizes with the way Indigenous people pay attention to their environment and extract vitality from the play of the elements and the play of life.

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As a fine arts consultant in the lower mainland in British Columbia, I taught middle class Asian students, and again I had a tremendous amount of freedom to develop arts-based programs throughout the district. Each school had a new Mac-based computer lab for multimedia production, and in 2001 I became one of a few people to implement their use in the classrooms.

Composing and now

While in Vancouver I also worked as a free-lance music composer for film and TV and developed the software skills for editing film and all of the technology for audio post-production. That allowed me to work with filmmaker-storytellers and be part of a storytelling team, so the writing, production and technology skills of my film career informed my role as a fine arts educator.

Throughout this music, media, and film career I continued to teach Buddhist meditation up and down the Northwest coast and continued to connect with as many local Elders and medicine carriers as I could in that capacity as a senior teacher in the Shambhala Buddhist tradition.

My life is filled with art, music, meditation and education. This thesis is woven out of my activity as an educator, an artist, and a meditator within an esoteric Buddhist tradition infused with shamanistic elements.

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Most recently the threads of my life came together in a particular way in the Canadian Maritimes, with a group of fellow yogins, educators, and artists all wanting to integrate these threads into one fabric. This current project, my expression of this fabric, arose while working with those people for the past seven years.

Chapter 3

Contemplative Film Practice: The Lion's Gaze

The centerpiece of this thesis is the exploration and development of the art practices of film merged with what I am characterizing as the meditative practice of *the lion's gaze*. It began to take shape during a pilot film project⁵ in the summer of 2016.

The Buddhist tradition is renowned for its methods of using the conceptual mind to point towards “the view,” which is inherently non-conceptual. It is best to remember that these concepts, as finely wrought as they can be, are only fingers pointing at the moon, not the actual moon. Padmasambhava, the Indian yogin instrumental in bringing Buddhism to Tibet, said that we should be like lions rather than dogs (Sherab & Dongyal, 1998). If you throw a stick for a dog, the dog will chase the stick. This is an allegory for how we habitually chase after thoughts mistaking them for the goal. But if you throw a stick for a lion it immediately turns to look at the thrower. He advises yogins to be like a lion and look at the source of the thought. The lion looks at the “I” who thinks it owns the thought.

⁵ The pilot study was a video project with another artist-educator yogin as participant.

We practiced meditation and did collaborative art as a context for discussions about how yogic practice informed our art and our work as educators.

The Pilot

In the summer of 2016 I recorded two art-making sessions between myself and another artist-educator yogin. The sessions required a fair amount of interaction between us, particularly around the management of the filmmaking technology. There was a lot of staging and preparation before the multiple record buttons were pressed.

In the second session I chose to simplify the filmmaking technology and increase the natural flow and dance of making art as meditation practice. Therefore we worked in the participant's studio only using one iPhone as both a video and audio recorder.

This time technology became a second thought—a fly on the wall. It demanded some attention in order to check batteries, audio levels, angles, but it was largely inconsequential to what was arising, which was much more unguarded and spontaneous.

During the editing process I discovered that the spontaneous, off-handed comments, and casual observations had a poignancy to their feel, timbre and timing, like a flash of truth or connection. I attempted to bring out the potency of those moments by either given them space to blossom in the edit, or by juxtaposing and triangulating them with other audio-video fragments, music, and text.

Whatever is seen with the eyes is vividly unreal in emptiness
yet there is still form . . .

Whatever is heard with the ears is the echo of emptiness yet real . . .

Whatever arises is merely the play of the mind. (Trungpa, 2015, p. 169)

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I started contemplating what was really unseen in this project, particularly in regard to the meditation itself as practiced moment to moment while making art and being with students. Reflections arose around how to settle in to the present, watch habitual patterns arise and go, or perceive a simple color or sound as luminous yet beyond the complication of a perceiver or perceived, or ride/attend to the basic shifts of attention, speed, fixation, gap, and spaciousness that characterize our conscious experience. I realized that the inner experience of the teacher is at the heart of good education.

Going Beyond the Pilot Project

I questioned if it was possible to work with the art of film even closer to the heart of this matter of revealing the inner practice. Could the art of film not only reveal inner practice but also enhance that practice? What would be gained if the writer, director, actor, music composer, and editor were all doing this practice and simultaneously allowing that practice to guide the art of filmmaking? Everything, from pressing the record button to setting the camera angle to editing the rhythm, and sequencing of the film, could be informed by the meditation practice. The choice of instruments for the score, the length of the notes, the use of chords, rhythm and melody, or choosing silence, would all be reflections of the practice. What kinds of film artifacts would result?

In an attempt to reveal that finer grain of experience, that Planck-scale mindfulness and awareness, I decided to film while on retreat and in daily life using a very small camera (iPhone), a simple point-of-view [POV] camera angle and a journaling technique. This

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marked a shift from producing the pilot film on a number of points: the meditative mindset, the arising and utilization of contemplative “cues” to open up to the present, exposition-of-consciousness-style shooting script, editing as reflection and expression of inner experience.

The most recent shift in my process occurred during the 2017 Canadian Society for the Study of Education Congress in Toronto. I met a group of fifty arts-based researchers during a pre-congress retreat (Walsh, Bickel, Leggo & Conrad, 2017) and later at various presentations throughout the weekend. It quickly dawned on me that I was hesitant and uncertain in my academic work. These artful scholars embodied their work. I perceived them modeling vitality for their work through being genuine and real. I realized that as long as I was genuine and real to myself then I had the confidence to answer the questions that other academics would bring to me.

Retreat

Retreat practice is a regular part of a meditation practitioner’s life. In its simplest terms retreat means living by yourself away from human contact for a period of time. A meditation retreat can follow a strict schedule with a specific sequence of meditations from morning to night, or it can be more relaxed with a couple of formal meditation sessions and the rest of the time bringing the meditative frame of mind to the ordinary activities of cooking, cleaning, studying, or simply watching the phenomenal world.

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Choosing retreat as the context for filming was important. Life slows down, creating a backdrop of simplicity that illuminates the clarity and flow of the moments. A wide boundary arises between waking life and dreams, solidity and imagination. The retreat atmosphere can seem ripe with moments of liminality, with glimpses of epistemological and ontological groundlessness. Retreat disrupts a practitioner's heavy conditioning and unexamined assumptions about reality. The possibility is always there to see what has not been seen.

Pre-Production

Choosing to work with a camera on retreat is actually a pre-production decision. It lays the ground for production and orients how the visuals and audio will be recorded. The pre-production stage of a standard film project involves script writing and planning. Pre-production, in the case of contemplative film practice, does not involve much writing, but, rather, the preparation for a meditative practice. Establishing and maintaining a meditation practice is beyond the scope here, but the following citations provide accessible traditional sources as well as solid representations of the four threads of meditation mentioned in Chapter I.

Meditation on peaceful abiding, resting one-pointedly in simplicity, is the basis of all meditation. Sakyong Mipham's book, *Turning the Mind Into An Ally* (Mipham, 2003) is an excellent guide for anyone interested in working with the speed and discontinuity of discursive mind.

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Formless meditation is best learned one-on-one with someone who has practiced it for some time. In lieu of that, Dakpo Tashi Namgyal, the fifteenth century scholar and yogin, wrote a number of treatises on Mahamudra that are very popular today among Western yogins. One would be hard pressed to get a more succinct and all-encompassing roadmap of formless meditation than *Clarifying The Natural State* (Namgyal, 2001).

Contemplative meditation is a huge arena. I've relied upon Pema Chödrön for many powerful contemplations of Buddhist "heart practices" on compassion and loving kindness. One of the most ubiquitous traditional contemplative meditation texts is Chekawa Yeshe Dorje's, *The Seven Points of Mind Training* which Pema Chödrön unpacks in her book, *Start Where You Are* (Chödrön, 1994).

A comment about the pre-production attention to view and meditation:

- This establishes the director's lens brought to the front of consciousness in this practice.
- Many of the traditional images and metaphors (lenses) of the meditative tradition such as "Be like an ocean" or "Be a child of illusion," when brought to mind in pre-production, are the actual cues that turn on the camera in the production phase.
- In post-production the view and meditation are the lens through which to play: watch the footage, edit, create text, compose music and create sound design, all with a healthy appreciation for improvisation and coincidence.

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Expressed in another way: the view and meditation of pre-production are the direct instructions for relaxing, dancing, artistically, filmically, into a big, open, energetic space.

As big or as precise a space as one can actualize.

Writing

One might think that, because of the importance of non-conceptual awareness, writing and conceptual thought are second-class citizens in the process of contemplative film practice, but this is not the case. The arising of thought is part of the play of the creative space itself. The role of writing in my pre-production process, particularly journaling in the manner of Julia Cameron's "morning pages" free-writing technique (Cameron, 1992) or Natalie Goldberg's attention to "first thoughts" (Goldberg, 2010) have proven to open fresh insights and threads to the engagement of meditation and art. Cameron and Goldberg practice a discipline of writing whatever arises in the mind at that moment. The pen does not stop, but records the flow of thought without editing or judgement. The way I sometimes experience this is as if the words are arising out of space without clear cause.

The Mahamudra and Maha Ati language talks of space in different ways: charged space, womb of space, space pregnant with potency. Space can be a synonym for mind, awareness, emptiness endowed with ceaseless display. This kind of free writing is one of my practices to access this space. Many of the words and phrases from this writing became material for what I later call "cueing practice," particularly in the production and post-production phases. Many contradictions and metaphors embedded in Mahamudra

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and Ati language are there to put the practitioner in a liminal space (Chögyam & Dechen, 2002) and these come forward when contemplating and writing.

And in some very real sense all is liminal space.

Tools and Technique

Technically, pre-production means testing out cameras, microphones, and recording procedures for simplicity and ease of use. Ideally the technology becomes an aid or support role to the moment of being present and then extending into the present moment. The intention to meditate-in-action is purposely connected to and invoked in the preparation and wearing of the recording device. The camera then provides the same role as lighting a candle or arranging a meditation cushion for a traditional meditation session.

The Script

The way I think about the script for a contemplative film in this study is basically an “exposition of consciousness” shot list in the sense that when I remember to open and de-centralize, I record the sense impressions of those moments on a camera. I practice an awareness of the exposition of my consciousness, the flow of various elements that emerge.

- the five sense impressions
- the mind moving between them
- the stability or fickleness of the flow

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- the awareness of body movement
- the moment of choice, or judgement
- the inner sensation buzzing in the background
- the shifting of different lenses and frames
- the uncertainty arising from nowhere
- the awareness of the space of mind
- the watcher expanding and contracting

The pre-production stage is an opportunity to refresh an understanding of the basic nature of how consciousness unfolds. This will influence the movement of the camera in response to image and sound in the production phase. In the production phase, the filming itself, these words, seed ideas, or touchstones, orient the attention, cue the attention, to rest in awareness, and dance with what arises.

For the sake of simplicity it is helpful to talk about pre-production and production as a sequence, but I find the relationship to be more of a continuous, reflexive loop.

Production

Advice to Self

Stay with the heart

tune in

to the flow of the moment

without agenda

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rest

settle in that space

be that space

you are the art that is

each moment.

You are space looking at itself

from nowhere

without center or fringe

spontaneous

brush stroke or thought

. . . arises.

dance with the play of phenomena

Glimpse the space too vast

for “self and other” to gain a solid purchase

How can you know before the occurrence of a knower?

Who’s observing the knower?

From where are they looking

and at what?

Who just asked that?

Settling into this undefinable space

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is the lion's gaze.

empty, luminous,

awareness.

without center.

Camera as Meditational Aid

The production phase, and its basic art-meditation, involves holding or wearing a recording device in response to the flow of sensory and mental occurrences. Small portable cameras are easy to use and keep close at hand.⁶ The way they are used in this study is mostly to capture point-of-view footage of the sight and sound of everything from waking up in the morning, cooking food, going for walks in the woods, practicing meditation, driving in a car, visiting shopping malls, and making visual art and music. In a more courageous or fully artistic manifestation, the camera can be part of the spontaneous movement of the body in space.

On the outer level, the camera is an extension of the eyes, ears, and body as it captures sight, sound, and movement. The camera can also take on an inner value, though it takes the practitioner's intention for this to operate. The work of Barbara Bickel (Bickel, 2004) and Medwyn McConachy (McConachy, 2017) both involve the camera lens as extension

⁶This research exclusively used an iPhone as a video recorder. On two occasions I used a portable digital audio recorder to record location ambiences and instrumental music in natural spaces. All the files were digital, and references to "film" are an aesthetic expression connected to the strips of celluloid I learned to edit in my high school years.

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of the body into a felt sense of the world's rhythms and layers of meaning. One of the ways they do this is through various ritual practices that reveal connections within society, our human psychological make-up and the physical environment itself. I place myself in similar territory to Bickel and McConachy in that the camera is a support for meditation and awareness training. It is an expressive tool for bringing awareness and joy to our lot in life.

My intention is that the camera encourages my awareness and inquisitiveness. A small camera requires little thought or attention before use, which is a key virtue. The mainstay style of practice of the Mahamudra and Maha Ati is the generation of, and close attention to, spontaneous moments of awareness. Putting hands on a small camera, pressing record are small gestures and movements that can synch up with this style of practice.

Cueing During Production

For thirty-five years I've worked with various cues, phrases, and slogans cut from the fabric of the teachings. Cues are a technique for coming to the present moment with some awareness. A cue is a short-hand for a longer teaching or meditation instruction. This short form of the teaching is purposefully put to memory so that it arises in the mind in response to somatic experience. The words and phrases flip the mind of the practitioner to pay attention with a little extra insight. The dawning of a cue such as "Regard your experience as a dream" can also create a strong somatic, or yogic response to a moment because it brings all of the rich experience represented by the cue.

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Cueing is a form of contemplative practice as described in Chapter 1. The elements of an exposition of consciousness can be used as cues to open and give space to whatever is occurring at that moment. Compelling cues, slogans, or frames are part of the meditative tradition, part of pre-production contemplations all the way through to the end of the contemplative film practice cycle.

What follows is a working list of thirteen cues with some examples of how they arose in certain imagery from the films *Dreamsign* and *Holofractals*. I have provided time codes and screen captures from the films as examples.

I. Portable Stage Set—The Buddhist view is that humans create backgrounds within which we live our lives. These backgrounds are part of our subconscious narrative. This cue brings awareness to this background of the basic space around ourselves. It may have a particular size or mood at any given moment. We each create the tone of the lighting. The stage set is inhabited by characters, the principle being ourselves. It is a hidden stage set where each individual is the writer, producer, director, actor, and art designer. As a practitioner I can explore how I am the source for this stage set, and then how I operate within it as a pre-existing background. It is the play of a set of unconscious frames and lenses. The frame *Holofractal* (00:47) is a self portrait superimposed on top of the image of a snake I drew from a dream. It was like a



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visitation from a deity of some kind. The impact of the experience led to all manner of self-reflection and narrative about what was being revealed here. In the end the only certainty I have is that it is all my mind. I am the snake, the deity, and the confused person trying to find meaning.

Taking the cue of the stage set heightens the practitioner's awareness practice and questions the fabrication of what is occurring.

2. Hologractal Perception—The smallest perceptual moments of sight, sound, feeling, or smell can reveal the ceaseless energy of the moment. In that way the wholeness of life is present in the smallest glimpse of sensory experience (Brakhage, n.d.). In contemplative film practice the hologractal cue allows the camera to take a



macro lens on things while simultaneously decentralizing and expanding into the view.

This frame *Dreamsign* (1:03) is in a series of fractal moments: a wisp of smoke, an ink brush stroke, and cream curling in coffee.

When I experienced these occurrences they pointed to the fragility of the world as it arises.

3. Movement—Movement is change. It is flow. Catching the constant flow in our life undermines the illusion that things are solid. Water, wind, beings, machines, inner feeling. It is a constant.

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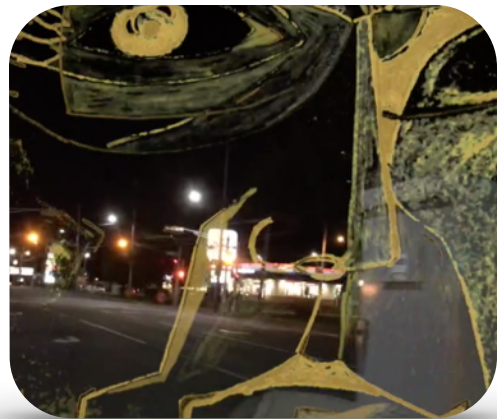
4. With a Nature Like Sky—Often our human experience does not seem particularly spacious. This cue reminds me to simply raise my lens to the horizon, then



raise my own gaze to the expanse of what is occurring in that moment. While in Toronto I was moved by this cue, by how much we try to cover up the sky, how easy it is to ignore, and how powerfully it transformed the claustrophobia of the urban environment. In the frame *Dreamsign* (7:25) a vertical view of

the sky from Dundas Street floats on a straight-up shot of the sky from a boat dock. I hear the city, but it doesn't steal my mind away.

5. Pain is Not a Punishment—In the frame *Holofractal* (2:59), the self-portrait is intense. In fact, self-portraits have been flashing into view for a few seconds at this point. It is hard to look at yourself and see the struggle embedded in the lines and colours. Chaos, uncertainty, depression, sadness, and fear are all part of the play of the mandala of experience.



Strong energy characteristically makes us shrink our lens and forget our background stage set. “Pain is Not a Punishment” cues us to see strong energy as neither for us nor against us. In fact, it often reveals where we are

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holding on to a small lens or frame that has outlasted its usefulness. Then, curiously, pain might be a reward.

6. Things are Symbols of Themselves—Things are completely what they are. They are not symbolic of a concept of something other than what they are. Our discomfort, in particular, is symbolic of our essential energy in a very direct way. To practice “things being symbols of themselves” (Trungpa, 1999, p. 57) is to regard the directness of whatever is happening as touching the hot wire of existence without intermediary. No buffer. Straight drink.

The frame from *Dreamsign* (7:30) is just a bee flying to a flower. And just a car driving down the road. On one hand they might symbolize beings travelling together through life. The moment of these images captured my attention because the flow and fragility of life was simply there and felt in a particularly direct way.



7. Shadows and light—Our visual field is constantly flowing with the movement of celestial bodies. The ever-changing angle of the sun keeps everything fresh. As the earth heats and cools from the sun, pressure zones are created causing wind and weather that cause the forms we see to dance with movement, moisture, light, and dark. These are amplified by the fickle physical processes of sight and tune us to the dream-like nature of

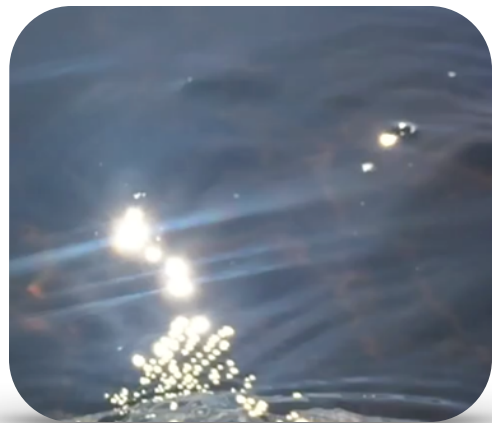
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ordinary experience. The frame from *Holofractal* (5:11) is from a time-lapse video of the evening light changing while I practiced meditation. I remember thinking that I should be able to notice the change in the light as I sat there, but I was never able. I found that I could easily notice clear changes in light within 30 second intervals,

and the closer the intervals became the closer I imagined feeling the earth and the sun careening through space.

8. Oceans and Waves—The oceans and waves cue is another trope to unify small occurrences (waves) with the background of emptiness and energy from which they arise (ocean). Our identity and stage set are waves. The frames and lenses are waves. Our awareness is non-local and without owner. It is the ocean. The frame from *Dreamsign* (4:10) exemplifies many cues, and not only are the vivid ripples of water dissolving as soon as they arise, but light from the sun is striking earth for the first time at that instant, both reflecting back out into the bigger space and also absorbing into the water. It is a moment of energy without anything to hold on to.



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9. Body-Mind as One Space—Our own body, as it breathes and moves through space, is a reflection of our mind. Wearing a camera captures the movement of our body and mind. The body-mind cue brings awareness to how movement reveals our state of mind and shifts our state of mind. This investigative territory is common to a



number of dancers, musicians, and sculptors. The frame from *Holofractal* (4:11) was taken when I recorded the sound of my footsteps which are an integral thread in the sound design from 3:23 to 5:03. The practice of walking and resting the mind in the movement of the body was a central activity of

this study.

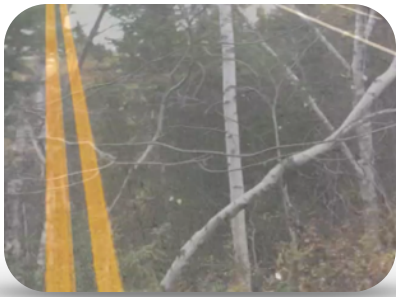
Andrea Carvalho reviews the exhibit, *interstice: the space [often small] between two objects or events* on kipjonesart.com (kipjones, 2011)

The relationship between our mental and physical spaces cannot be understated; in a number of ways they are one and the same. Space is not unlike a living organism. It can change or be changed, affect our moods, be mysterious and even ambiguous. For kipjones, space, and its experience has been a major focus in his practice.

10. Speed—The rapidity of our thoughts and the speed of phenomena around us are excellent relationships to explore. The speed of life can be met with a slow, spacious

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relationship to the camera. Exploring the flickering patchwork quilt quality to experience brings insight to perception and thought. The frame from *Holofractals* (1:58) is from such an exploration where I was walking down a forested road with the camera



on my shoulder. As I walked I tracked how my attention continually flashed to the centreline on the road, and back to a more panoramic perspective, so I filmed some close perspectives of the centre line. In the editing process, post-production, I mimicked the fragility of my

attention by jumping from one to the other. The sequence takes a lot of energy to watch. How much of our personal energy is spent mitigating the effects of disjointed experiences? It is exhausting to be a “scatter brain.”

II. Time—I find that working with time-lapse footage allows me to see what is difficult to see. When the moon rises I mostly see it anchored in the sky, but know it is arching beautifully. The meditation is to slow down enough to become sensitive to small changes. The frame from *Holofractal* (00:57) is a time-lapse sequence filmed while I sat for an hour watching a sunrise. Everything in my experience arises and falls like those clouds. Suddenly a child is conceived



out of nothing. It slowly grows and leaves the mother’s body, but it is difficult to pinpoint when the child first appeared. I suspect the way the clouds dissolve may inform how I myself will eventually dissolve from this existence.

12. Generosity—Generosity is a force of opening. It extends me into the world, and leaves me and the world changed. Being generous with a camera is like inviting reciprocity with the world. Offering to connect. Generosity is a willingness to chemically interact with phenomena and beings. To willingly be changed. Generosity as a cue loosens our territoriality as an artist. It is more concerned with “other.” This frame



from *Dreamsign* (5:18) arose exploring the intersection of the natural environment and the urban environment. This space under these bridges is basically ignored. Historically it used to be a community, and now it is dominated by highways flying overhead. To my sensibility, this

place is a power spot. It is at a narrows linking a harbour and a large protected basin. The views are still beautiful. Many people in the world live in close proximity to these kinds of structures, or have had their lives interrupted by them. Sometimes it is just a little too much to fully feel the narrative I have about this place. Sometimes I feel fortunate to know this place, as it still has gifts to give.

13. Life is Like a Dream—This is a very important yogic cue for disrupting a meditation practitioner’s allegiance to subject-object duality and to the solidity of external phenomena. The daytime Buddhist yogic practice for this cue is called Illusory Body (Holecek, 2016, p. 158). Illusory Body is the practice of checking with yourself if you are really perceiving your current experience, or if there is something about the

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present state that is “dream-like.” When you walk outside the colors might be off. You might not feel the weight of your body with familiarity. Checking for gravity is common. Jumping a bit. Dropping objects. When you turn away from a sense object you can turn back to see if it is still more or less the same or if it has transformed in some unusual way. The practice feels like suspending automatic belief in the solidity of what you are experiencing.

This practice is also quite powerful when you review your moving images or photographs. Sometimes you see or hear something new or unnoticed. You ask yourself, “Are you watching your own dream?” The cumulative effect of the illusory body discipline is two-fold. The first is that Illusory Body practice questions our conceptual stronghold on reality, which includes questioning our lens-of-the-moment. It creates the conditions to open up into a bigger awareness, or awareness-emptiness. The second effect is that during the night, during dream-time, the yogin is more likely to question if their dream is in fact a dream. This induces lucid dreaming which is an essential aspect of Dream Yoga. Dream Yoga is beyond the scope of this study, though dream images like the snake are used in the films. In this frame from Holofractal (3:21) we see an image of flowers in the sky. “Sky flowers” is actually a traditional example of illusion, imagination, and dreams. Putting the flowers in the sky occurred in the editing suite as part of the post-production process, but the original



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experience watching the flowers move in relation to each other gave the moment a power that cut through any impulse to invalidate the moment as merely ordinary.

The “life is like a dream” cue, which is anchored in traditional yogic meditation, continues to operate in the final process of filmmaking: post-production. However, post-production, film editing and sound, moves contemplative film practice towards a much more artistic dance with phenomena. This shift is significant enough that post-production deserves its own chapter to mark its character.

Chapter 4

Post-Production: Improvisation and Auspicious Coincidence

Post-production is a compilation process, a finishing process involving layers of sensory information, expression, and concept, and, as with the rest of contemplative film practice, it is ultimately concerned with self-awareness. I explored self-awareness in post-production through an improvisatory responsiveness to the tremendous amount of media created in production. I was confronted with the multiple strata of experience embedded in the visuals, sound, and music available for this phase of the filmmaking. Post-production also revealed an energetic shift from a high degree of receptivity towards more radiation and expansion.

In short, there was a lot of material from a wide range of media, and the dance with that media took on more energy. As you will read, traditional linear methods for organizing and filtering through the media were used but, in order to “dance” within this wealth of material, and to create a final film that provoked freshness and insight, I extensively utilized non-linear, intuitive processes alongside conceptual themes and cues from journal writing.

Here is a rough hewn outline of the post-production process I employed.

- The first step was to log each clip according to conventional film technique. Each clip, a digital media file, was roughly edited and given a name indicating its content and placed in a folder named by place and date.

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- Logging the clips allowed me to survey them from a distance, and to discern simple organizing principles or themes from within the media's rich layers of expression and meaning.
- Each theme guided an improvisatory editing process employing a certain amount of creative coincidence. For example edit points arose from rhythmic pattern inspired in the moment by eye flickers and heartbeats. A second layer of moving image could be chosen much like one opens a book to random pages creating superimposed images from different times and places. Early in this text I spoke of the script for the film as an "exposition of consciousness," where chance and spontaneity are natural parts of the landscape.
- Once a timeline of thematically moving image was created, layers of sound and music were superimposed in a similarly improvised fashion. Sound from urban landscape might coincide with forest images, or animal sounds from a sound design library might be randomly heard in concert with unlikely visual information. Improvised music might find initial inspiration from one film clip, but ultimately find a surprising home somewhere else.
- On three occasions I returned to previous film locations with a portable audio recorder to capture better forest, water, and wind sound. I also brought wind instruments with me and improvised music in response to a full experience of the environment. This audio was then used in the editing process.

This chapter will include an exposition of the moment-to-moment process I went through as outlined above. However, at the moment of this writing I am haunted.

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Something is nagging at me. Something is asking to be answered.

I fear this narrative of the spontaneous, chance aspect of my experience will seem frivolous, mere play, lacking discipline, or ignorant of the tradition of film production. I will write in the abstract for a while, to orient the post-production process of this study, drawing on the work and words of a variety of artists, yogins, and writers, who consider coincidence and synchronicity as valid and insightful aspects of the human experience. Improvisation and chance are employed for more than subjective play. This play is serious and employed for insight into the way things actually are.

Revisiting the View

It is interesting to consider the *temporal* nature of film as an art form. Digital video editing software and music-sound design software literally sequence horizontal regions of film and sound into a temporal artistic arc. The mind of the filmmaker takes in how the visuals and sound weave through the timeline. The creative mind also works spontaneously and non-conceptually, disrupting, or setting aside its own linearity and conventions around causality, choice, and the subject-object, creator-created duality. The linearity of time is a property of the media, but from the point of view of the Lion's Gaze, takes secondary importance to how life continually arises like a flame. Part of contemplative post-production practice is staying with the creative grey zone around various nested dualities and conceptual fixations. Conventionally we assume a subject, "me," acting in time on phenomena "out there" in order to create a future piece of art.

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As the importance of the creation increases, so increases the primacy of the creator, and identification with the art. Improvisation, and wakefulness around the spontaneous arising of random moments, thoughts, perceptions, and impulses, potentially unsettles the creator-creation binary. Instead, the experience of the final product is like an afterthought that somehow arises out of the mutually interdependent entanglement of what appears to the artist-meditator's awareness.

Tendrel: Auspicious Coincidence

The Buddhist view of this study is that mental and physical reality partakes of non-dual space and unceasing energy. If the space of mind and phenomena is inherently beyond duality—inside and outside, self and other, past and future, sacred and profane—then this space is a radical openness free of boundaries. Now consider that this boundary-less space is potent with unceasing energy. This energy is like a living backdrop to all experience, a flow and patterning accessible in the moment.

This is where and how coincidence and chance partake of meaning and auspiciousness.

Tendrel is the Tibetan word for “coincidence” (Trungpa, 2001, p. 91). *Tendrel* is most often associated with the teachings on “interdependent arising,” which go back to the early sutras ascribed to Siddhartha Gautama, the historical Buddha (Rahula, 1974, p. 44). The basic notion of *tendrel* is that everything arises in dependence upon everything else in a given moment. Therefore everything partakes of the nature of that moment. When a yogin is able to meet the *tendrel* of the moment, the present coincidence, then the

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moment is auspicious. It is auspicious because there is synchronicity with the unfolding of the moment. Tendrel has the sense that being “on time” is a way of seeing the appropriateness of the situation, of “riding” the moment.

In short, working with meaningful coincidence is solidly within the Buddhist yogic tradition underlying this study.

Jungian Synchronicity

The Jungian concept of synchronicity, and finding meaning in chance and randomness, was originally his commentary on the worldview that the Tibetans share with the Chinese. Carl Jung, discussing the yarrow stalk technique for generating random numbers, writes about coincidence in the forward to the Wilhelm-Baynes translation of *The I Ching or Book of Changes* (Jung, 1980).

This . . . involves a certain curious principle that I have termed synchronicity, a concept that formulates a point of view diametrically opposed to that of causality. Since the latter is merely a statistical truth and not absolute, it is a sort of working hypothesis of how events evolve out of one another, whereas synchronicity takes the coincidence of events in space and time as meaning something more than mere chance, namely, a peculiar interdependence of objective events among themselves as well as with the subjective (psychic) states of the observer or observers.

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Jung's mention of subjective psychic states invites us to look at his theory of archetypes. Archetypes, in Jung's later writing, are a matrix of meaning embedded in more than the individual human psyche and subconscious. Archetypal qualities, in Jung's view, are encountered in the play of events in nature and physical systems as well as inner experience. As outrageous as it sounds, for Jung, archetypes pervade both the psyche as well as the outer cosmos. This is at the basis of Jung's theory of synchronicity where meaningful coincidence and patterning are evident because all inner and outer phenomena that arise in a moment, including the archetypal matrix, share the qualities of that moment. Dr Richard Aziz sums up Jung's extended, transpersonal understanding of archetype theory and synchronicity in these words.

For Jung the call to individuate arises from the deepest sources of life. . . . Both inwardly and outwardly nature strives unceasingly to bring about the realization, in the life of the individual, of a unique pattern of meaning . . . and assumes the character of a drama that takes the whole of nature for its stage. (Aziz, 1990, p. 165)

The highly respected historian, Richard Tarnas, a self-proclaimed critical thinker and skeptic, thoroughly studied the claims of astrology which connects the position of the planets to the chance occurrence of our human birth. Working off of Jung's theories on synchronicity, Tarnas centers his study upon archetypes as somehow embedded in, or synchronized with the fabric of the cosmos, rather than localized in the subjective

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subconscious of humans. In *Cosmos and Psyche: Intimations of a New World View* (Tarnas, 2006) he writes,

Together with many colleagues and students, I have now steadily pursued this research for three decades. What I have found far surpassed my expectations. Much remains a mystery, and certainly much will always remain a mystery, but I have become convinced, after the most painstaking investigation and critical assessment of which I am capable, that there does in fact exist a highly significant—indeed a pervasive—correspondence between planetary movement and human affairs, and the modern assumption to the contrary has been erroneous.

(pp. 67 - 68)

From Scientific Research

There are many contemporary examples arising from rigorous scientific research where new ideas of randomness, temporality, and space are being accommodated by modern scientific paradigms. Many of them—quantum studies, systems theory within biology and chemistry, sociology—are fascinating and difficult to understand, but what follows is elegant in its simplicity.

In 1976 Robert Jahn, the Dean of the Princeton University School of Engineering, who was a pioneer in the development of the plasma rocket module, accepted an undergrad independent study that seemed to have a clean and well-designed experimental model to test whether human intention could influence physical systems (Psyleron, 2016). The

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experiment involved building a simple *random number generator* that produced multiple binary numbers, zeros and ones, every second. Human subjects then projected their intentions towards the machine to see if the mind could alter the randomness of the generator. The assumptions of the experimenters were that the random number generators would produce an equal numbers of “0” and “1” despite the will of the human participants. What occurred was that human intention did indeed seem to change the outcome of the numbers. Jahn was so perplexed he continually strove for an answer to this improbability, for instance building in more isolation between the random number generators and the electromagnetic field of the participants. Forty years have gone by, and there are now random number generators in constant operation all over the world. They have recorded disruptions in randomness around world events such as the tragedies of 9/11 and the Indonesian Tsunami. Jahn and his colleagues from *PEARL (Princeton Engineering Anomalies Research Lab)* are now operating as *Psyleron* and are still developing these investigations and collecting data to this day. Jahn claims, in spite of significant critique and scrutiny, that their work at *Psyleron* has overwhelming evidence that “the human mind has a small but measurable influence on physical systems (Psyleron, 2009, 02:31), “they seem to be entering into some sort of dialogue which influences both the machine and the human mind that is interacting with it” (03:23).

The cumulative effect of these references is a question as to the true nature of randomness, chance, and causality, and a consideration of the view that the non-linear aspects of phenomena do not invalidate them, but point to a constant arising of living patterns of energy. Spontaneity is not necessarily subjective. Chance is not necessarily

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meaningless. Contemplative film practice is a creative dance with this outer and inner flow. In this study I've chosen spontaneity and coincidence as responses to this flow, and I employ them in the layering and ordering of the final film, revealing new connections, surprising juxtapositions, and fresh levels of meaning for both the creator and the audience.

The universe is constantly trying to reach us to say something or teach something, but we are rejecting it all the time. In categorizing your experience as mundane and sacred, good and bad, significant and insignificant, you are rejecting symbolism, right and left, all the time. You are rejecting the whole thing. (Trungpa, 2008, p. 35)

The Lion's Gaze and The Lion's Roar

I want to tackle a point of friction I've come to in contemplative post-production. It arises primarily in terms of music composition and improvisation, but also in editing video. It is the friction of moving along a continuum between receptivity and expressivity, from a meditative knowing and being, towards an artistic doing and radiating.

The Lion's Gaze is supported by an allegiance to the simplicity of being, to non-fabrication and non-centralization, tuning into, and riding the energy of what is arising, observing the mind inseparable from the vividness of the perception. However, in my

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experience,⁷ meditators will often mistakenly mute or dampen the colorfulness of their thoughts and activities as a tactic for cutting the speed of aggression, for resting in the bigger space of mind. Art, however, can demand a bigger field of play—more range. I seek a movement toward actually expressing strong energy without self-consciousness, fixation, and ownership. Adjusting the balance of contemplative film practice from meditation towards art is like shifting from gazing, to include roaring.

The Lion's Roar (Trungpa, 1992) might be likened to a fearless proclamation that any state of mind is workable. Sound and music are powerfully connected to a person's inner energy. Sound not only activates, but *is*, the strata, waves, and atmospheres that crisscross through us as humans. Post-production in film is a place where decisions about intensity of the energy are made: the speed of the edits and the complexity of visual layering. Audio layers are the nuances of timbre, harmony, rhythm, speed, melody, and presence.

I search for radiance—to visualize the world into fullness with a musical gesture, a proclamation. Sometimes it is a wordless ache in the breath. Sometimes it is accompanied by a flashing thought burning bright.

“The world is sacred!”

⁷ I became an accredited meditation instructor in the Vajradhatu Buddhist community in March of 1987 and since then have maintained long-term relationships with meditation students and taught numerous meditation programs throughout North America.

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“Tears are blessings.”

“Vividness is its own reward.”

“Fear is not punishment.”

“All waves return to the ocean.”

Something juicy appears and comes into being—into pitch, rhythm, timbre, polyphony, text— declaring this moment worthy, that nothing need be rejected.

I am habitually coming into being. Radiating into the world like music improv.

Musicians can be like the trumpeter and flag bearer at the vanguard of a campaign to conquer fear. Music is like a kiss that inspires courage on contact.

So what is the problem? Gaze and roar, Oh artist-yogin!

The meditator’s inclination to reduce the speed of experience, to retreat, to simplify sense impressions is wise. It is like having training wheels on your bicycle. When I express myself musically I notice I am easily entranced and seduced by the experience of music creation. I flash between a genuine spontaneous arising and something manufactured by hope and fear: self-consciousness. Our egos constantly arise within the flow of unceasing energy. There is a natural slippage back and forth between pure joy without agenda, or the Lion’s Roar, and wanting to keep something for myself, losing the Lion’s Gaze.

Two Saving Graces

Two saving graces, related cues or frames, have arisen in this study: suffering and love. At the risk of generalizing, I contemplate that the *Lion's Gaze* sees suffering, the groundlessness and illusion of our frames, our self-identity. The *Lion's Roar* expresses the qualities of the heart: love, compassion, empathy. The combination brings an important tenderness and vulnerability to this contemplative art practice. Missteps have got to be embraced. Otherwise art and music just walk on eggshells. Yes, roaring can intoxicate the roarer. Our love can turn into a trip. But the *Lion's Gaze* is actually strengthened by "mistakes." It is painful when our vision shrinks. Small vision is a fabrication, an illusion, and vulnerability is like a blessing of wisdom and compassion. Self-consciousness can arise in the midst of a *roaring wave*, then *gaze* at itself and resolve back into the ocean.

The Space of No Sound

Music is the inherently expansive energy of emotion. It is playing with fire. It is the swelling of the ocean. We cannot abandon the suffering of the world. Art and meditation dance in the landscape of both fixation and freedom. Joy is inseparable from pain. Music is a good companion!

For these very same reasons it is important to experiment with no sound at all in some of the film pieces. As we will read later, Brakhage (Brakhage, 2010) favours silence in films in order to clear space for the visual sense consciousness to resonate in the body without the colouring of sound.

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In my experience, silence is foundational to improvisation practice. Art needs space. Space—aural space, visual space, mental space—is a hospitable environment for creativity. It provides the ultimate backdrop of simplicity against which our insights are illuminated, against which chance occurrences are illuminated, against which the arc of improvisations are illuminated.

As well, there is the sound of the space I am in right now to wake me up.

Improvisation and Auspicious Coincidence

There are many different concepts about improvisation. Bill Plake (Plake, n.d) is a prominent jazz music educator who teaches awareness, through the Alexander Technique, to elite professional performance artists. He sees improvisation much like the process of speech in that conversation is a back and forth, each voice “in response” to the other. As he points out, we do not necessarily plan ahead each word we are going to say in a conversation, but nonetheless words arise. This is slightly different than a simultaneous “mutual arising.”

Lecturing on the nature of improvisation, George E. Lewis (Columbia, 2011), Edwin H. Case Distinguished Professor of American Music at Columbia University, and highly accomplished jazz improviser, resonates with this current work saying,

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We are not dealing with the mere creation of a work of art. The goal is rather, to transform ourselves. This is, or should be the goal of our research in the humanities, and so it is with my work on improvisation Improvisation is everywhere, but it is very hard to see because this ubiquitous practice of everyday life, fundamental to the existence and survival of every human formation, is as close to universal as contemporary critical method could responsibly entertain. (11:06)

Improvisation is the ubiquitous practice of everyday life! I have often contemplated improvisation as a practice for tuning into auspicious coincidence as it arises in our lived experience. Lewis's words push me to look further.

Trungpa (2001) refers to catching coincidence as "being on time" (p. 91). Being on time is a wakeful presence to how phenomena are arising, lining up, or working together. This kind of time is, therefore, said to be appropriate or auspicious. It fits the situation.

Hayward & Hayward (1998) refer to auspicious coincidence as a gap, or space between moments, when the power of "what is" enters (p. 228). Poets have been particularly groundbreaking in their methods and understanding of chance operation, cut-up techniques, keep-the-pen-moving practices starting with the Beat movement (Burroughs, DiPrima, Ginsberg & Waldman, 2004).

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Mahamudra Pointing-Out Instructions

“Lhundrup” is a Tibetan word meaning “spontaneously present” and is part of a classical four-stage Mahamudra pointing-out instruction. These instructions, while articulated in various public books, are required by the tradition, to be given personally from teacher to student. In Tibet these instructions were very rare.



What is being pointed out, in four different stages, is the essential nature of reality: 1) appearances are mind, 2) mind is empty, 3) emptiness is *spontaneous presence*, 4) spontaneous presence is self-liberation (Dorje, 2001, pp. 162-179). You may be able to see how contemplative film practice takes inspiration from the first three of these stages.

First, the appearance of sense objects cues the yogin to look for the very mind apprehending the appearances. Second, that mind, from the point of view of the Lion’s Gaze, is inseparable from space. Third, that space is imbued with spontaneous presence, luminosity, or energy. Fourth, the last stage—spontaneous presence of luminosity as self-liberation—is certainly the aspiration of this thesis study, but perhaps it is hubris to proclaim anything more than what Lewis suggests: a journey of personal and collective transformation.

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Now we have a number of intertwined words getting at similar territory: luminosity, spontaneous presence, energy, space, emptiness. “Empty cognizance” is how Tulku Urgyen (Urgyen, 2001, p. 59) often refers to this energetic space. Spontaneity and improvisation, at their best, are ways of dancing in openness charged with life-force.

Ed Sarath, a jazz music educator from Michigan State University, seeks to understand the depth and scope of consciousness from the perspective of Integral Theory (Wilber, 2000). Sarath contemplates music as a time-bound art form more than many other disciplines, but in an attempt to understand the non-dual, pure perception aspect of improvisation, Sarath (Sarath, 2011) speaks of “point values of time” and “span values of time” (Part 1, 5:33). Our ordinary understanding of time is a sequence of point values where, to a large degree, meaning is derived by what occurs before and after a point. The resonance for this study is that conditioned patterns of thought and habit are lodged in this linear strata of experience. Engaging a span value of time, however, is “access to an overarching presence” (Part 2, 2:14) where Integral Theory understands this overarching presence as a non-local higher conscious where the individual small “s” self journeys to a larger Self (2:57). This sounds, at least on the surface, like “being on time” from Trungpa, or “gaps between moments” from Hayward & Hayward.

Whether there is a direct correlation between these various alternative conceptions of time is for someone else to parse. Suffice it to say that Sarath seeks to understand the relationship between improvisation, non-linear time, and the practice of awareness and non-dual consciousness.

Notes From Post-Production

It is time to move away from the abstract toward the actual experience of post-production work: coalescing, and weaving the moving images, sound, and music into film. If George Lewis is right, then, at some level, we all understand improvisation, as it is the nature of life. So when I am inspired to pay attention to life, then I experience its improvisation, and how to attend to the task at hand—assembling a timeline of audio and video. The writing that follows is an attempt to describe my exposition of consciousness. I want to expose the random, chance flashing between thought, action, gap, sense impression, feeling tone, gap, creative action, sense impression, and on and on.

I want to uncover the improvisatory coincidence at play in this work.

A Story From The Editing Suite

The first stage in post-production is logging and organizing the clips. The films embedded in this text, *Dreamsign* and *Holofractal*, are 18 minutes of film extracted from my thesis library of many hours of footage collected for more than a year.⁸ I want to offer a window into the experience of organizing those images and how it was the start of the creative arising, the playing in a pallet of image and sound, that is post-production. I attempt a window into my experience.

⁸As it turned out, I also accessed my previous personal library of video footage from other times in my life, particularly when I was passionate about filming wildlife.

WAKING UP

As I recreate this exposition of consciousness I embed it with frames from the thesis video library. I write in the present tense.



Watching the footage I re-experience each moment. There is distance, somewhat dream-like, as each clip excites my memory of other things. Sometimes (everytime?) the footage triggers an experience of my internal body weather, my gut feelings. I see patterns, contrasts, things I didn't notice before, sounds, breathing, movement with rhythm, unguarded moments where my "filmmaker-thinking-too-much" appears, or pure-mistake footage.

Always I feel impulses. A kind of ache. Not unpleasurable, a desire to leap into movement. I wait. I leap. Wait then leap. Leap then second guess myself. Whatever happens I step on it. I spring off of it. That is brilliant, then don't hold on. That is desperate, don't hold on. Allow. Allow. Gap out.

I see the crumbling surface of the road looks like the shadows on the wall. In my headphones I hear the wings of the bee for the first time. I listen to the sound of the room I'm in. Tinitus.

"This art is capturing light with my body."

I see and hear my natural body rhythm. Camera bounces.

That is so ordinary and funny.

I am overwhelmed by a glimpse of streetlight dancing on the road as the wind moves the branches. I want someone to love this, just move on.

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I place the media in folders by either time and place, but I add qualitative labels as well: dream, pattern, speed, urban, ordinary, chaos, light. I try to be linear. I can feel myself gathering a picture of the gestalt of the work so far. Do I know what is going on? Do I know what I am doing? No. Move on. I know what I think has been going on, but I can feel myself pulling back as if to view a greater wholeness. In the end there is only to start. I go to my journal.



I leaf through from the back of one journal. I watch as my eyes and attention flash onto the page. Like a wriggling fish my mind flows with the energy of “ahh” and “hmmm” and “ha” and “huhh.” I read *holofractal narrative*. Fractals, yes, that is happening right now. I read *Life is Like a Dream*. Check. Things feel a little disjointed. Gap out. What is actually happening right now? Are colours a little too bright or dull? If I’m dreaming then I’m making this whole thing up. I’m the creator of my own narrative. What is outside of that narrative?

What is the weather like?

Back to the footage. Yes. Dreams. Let that be a seed syllable to work with. The concepts are tumbling over one another. Dreams beget holofractals beget visualizations beget watcher begets no watcher, no dreamer, no meditation.

WAKING UP



I feel my own dream. Everything is dancing light. I am. I reach for light and drag clips of light patterns onto the timeline. I watch. I feel the moment. Can I feel the

movement of this clip? There is a swelling of pressure, heat, tingling, movement, patterning in my body that I ride. I allow it to flow as I watch. Situations are continuous circles of beginnings, middles, and ends. Breathe. Risings and fallings. I cut the clips based on rising and falling energy. Now I feel like the situation is over. Now I choose (how I don't know) to let the flow of this image dissolve into chaos, slightly uncomfortable. Why? I don't know. I want to. I want to feel the charnel ground a bit.

Let things fall apart. There is friction.



I put light patterns end to end on the timeline. How does it feel moving from one to the other? Like a dream? The image is too stable. I'm caught by its singularity. It wasn't like that when I shot. Was I spacing out? Ah, maybe I was manipulating, manufacturing.

I remember the flash of a leaf, sky, the smell of rain, reflections everywhere, checking in with the camera, stopping. Stopping. I always stop. Gap out. Take in all the fabric and strata. Feel the resonance. Wherever it is. My body sort of quivers.

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The tension of what I'm seeing builds. A disconnect builds. I grab one clip and drop it on the other. Transparency. This experience has transparent layers. The foreground and background switch out, back and forth. I feel my voice pull at the prana in my chest. I will go back to this location. Something wants to sing inside me. The disconnect is really a strong connection. Is more a yearning to feel the connection.

I go back to this place and breathe into my duduk. It feels like a piece of the forest. The ramesh, the reed, fills my mouth. Takes all my breath. My whole chest, neck, cheeks



swell. The centre of the sound feels bigger than my body. One note is more than enough. I notice I play for an imaginary audience. Myself. I let the thought go its own way. I press record and blow myself into the forest. I look up and see a jet trail blooming in the sunlight.

Now that I'm back in the editing suite I enjoy this audio. This helps. Even the cars on Purcell's Cove Road are appropriate. Suddenly I am remembering a singer whose voice cried out in one of my films, she called to the dralas while the visuals spoke of urban gang violence. I drag the duduk recording over top of the panning of some electric wires cutting through space over top my head. Electric wires look like cracks in space. I feel, imagine, their density and radiation as it mixes with the forest duduk. What am I feeling? Is this a dream, or is this just the way it is? Everything informs everything. Everything matters to everything?

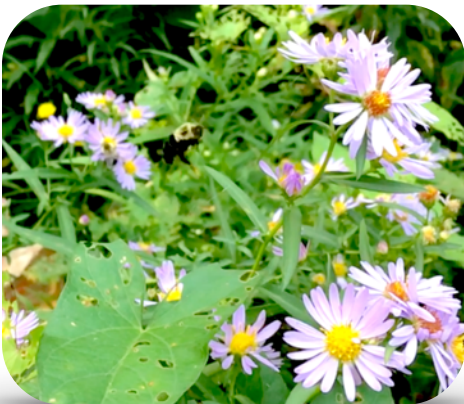
WAKING UP

On retreat I make a fire. I watch the match catch the paper and the flame brings every fire puja retreat I've done into my body. This fire is Agni Deva. I am filled. I want to bring this into fullness. These guitar strings are such a delicate presence. I want to give them voice, turn a few dials, and I hear a beautiful ambient distortion. The slightest pressure and nuanced gesture of my fingers sends out waves of intensity. I take a few passes at the footage and notice I am struggling. Am I trying to create something that does not want to be born to this moment?

I stop watching the footage. I let the guitar and I just be with ourselves for a few minutes. The rest of the film plays on the timeline. I play with the strings. I am playing a pulsing, grinding complexion. I realize I've forgotten about the picture. I look up and see a shot of my hand. Fingers are curving through space. I remember this. The mudra of inviting, convoking, drawing on the fabric of the space. The space looks thick, almost solid. The sound is the fingers exciting the unseen patterns of life. Space is thick. Thick with life. I've forgotten the room. There is no one here. No one is watching. Space is no-thing, and so vividly appearing.

The guitar sounds stay over the hand.

Somehow a moment happened.



I think I am defaulting to the cliché of a dream. Dappled forest. Light on water. I second guess my appreciation of simple beauty. But I MUST include

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this amazing shot of the bees in the back yard, flying by my head like drunked Lancaster pilots.

Leap, Robyn.

Crack through this second thought.

I impulsively grab a shot from a car ride. Camera jammed against the front window



driving in the suburbs. The movement, the

speed, the parallax is intense.

I'm working on a laptop in a café and ask the barista for the French word for "vertiginous"

which I believe I have never used before.

I don't know where that came from. Is it a

word?

The parallax is *vertigineux*.

The car is flying through space. I remember this as utterly ordinary. Just keeping

between the lines on the road. Do I ignore this intensity all the time?

Wait.

Stop.

I put the bees on top of the car footage. I see bee bombers wobble down the road in

front of my car. We are all flying. We careen and float and wobble.

For a second, as if in a dream, I am a bee.

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Till The Thought Lets Go

How does one choose when to trim a clip? Questions filter through the seed concept or theme as it resides in my body, and my body knows if the seed syllable is unpacking itself. When is “on time?” What is appropriate to this moment? What is the effect of that edit point? There is a dance of tension and release, consonance and dissonance necessary to bring out the complexity and nuance of a theme. Words, barely even concepts, arise in my mind.

Too much.

Stay.

Go.

Increase.

Burn hot.

Accommodate.

Disintegrate.

Slowly, closely follow.

Nothing is happening.

Each word or phrase is preceded by tension and release in my body—a dance of changing *energy intensity levels*.⁹ I constantly tune my somatic lens to each phrase. It takes practice, and is not always easy. I like to feel my weight shifting back and forth on my feet. I’m in good company here.

⁹ Appendix 3 is an explanation of an artistic lens I use that works with energy intensity levels as they arise in the somatic tension and release of the body.

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As a film composer, editor, and sound designer Walter Murch looms as an artist of exceptional perspicacity (Ondaatje, 2002). Murch cuts film while standing before his edit suite. He explains that his body tells him when to find the cut point in a scene or piece of footage. In his body he feels when a moving image has held the fullness of a thought, then he cuts. I often wonder what somatic signals to pay attention to. Trungpa Rinpoche advises that feeling a somatic edge, or discomfort may be a sign of space and freshness. In particular, by working with space in the visual field, it has a strong connection to space in the mind, and as the mind experiences the space, so moves the body. What follows is a question-and-answer exchange during one of Trungpa's film workshops (Trungpa, 1979, pp. 64-65).

There should be room to question, not have the whole thing presented to you as though by a machine gun. The audience should take part in it. Space is the most important thing—space and silence. Then you begin to value objects.

Question: There is something about being gripped like that. Your breathing changes. It effects you directly and fundamentally.

Trungpa: Definitely. It has been said with relation to the Maha Ati practice that the eyes are one of the most important exits. . . . Visual effects are most important in their effects on the mind. . . . Generally an audience comes to see a film with some expectations. When they begin to feel they're not going to see what they expected, it is somewhat strangling.

Question: Do you mean giving the audience pain in a sense? When the tension becomes so painful you can't stand it any more, then you switch, and not until?

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Trungpa: Well, you can't overlay it. But at the brink of nothing ever happening, something happens—but something quite different from what you expected to see.

Question: As if giving the audience time to make the decision of what will happen next? And . . . you could reward their tension?

Trungpa: Exactly. Maybe we'd go very fast then.

As I edit, I try various lengths of cuts and patterns, and track the tension in my body. Is the tension the experience of space? Is there a place in my body that says it is "on time?" Can I let spontaneous arising be an expression of sanity? I explore an edge: an extra beat or two. Let space do what it does best, and just burst into freshness.

Final Reflections on Contemplative Post-Production

I have tried to place myself in the good company of deeper thinkers and more experienced artists than myself who are improvisers and shaman of chance occurrence. I have provided a window on my post-production process through writing an exposition of consciousness-in-process. I have grappled with resolving the continuum between meditative watching and tracking of experience at one end, and artistic proclamation on the other. The actual films themselves must stand as the final word on post-production for this thesis study. The films *Dreamsign* and *Holofractals* are not final statements, but two of many possible spontaneous dances between myself and the world as we coincidentally arose in dependence upon one another. For me they are a start. I have

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taken time to develop something I know is useful to at least me. In spite of all of the abstractions I gathered, this work doesn't feel frivolous or disconnected from who I am.

The final word on post-production goes to the old guard of experimental film in North America: Stan Brakhage (2010). His filmmaking activities formed an intense, and transformative personal journey in his life. I am amazed at what he accomplished in understanding perception and awareness without benefit of a tradition like I have relied upon. In many ways I am waiting for someone to rightfully point out that everything that I have written is obvious and nothing new. Brakhage discovered something new in the art of film. It is almost yogic in its precise lens on perception, and truly improvisatory and non-linear.

The other inspiration for including Brakhage is that his work goes further than this research study in turning the "audience" into an active explorer of perception.

Stan Brakhage

Collaborator with beat poets Kenneth Rexroth, Anne Waldman and avant-garde artist John Cage, film professor at Art Institute of Chicago and University of Colorado, Stan Brakhage was at the forefront of experimental film in North America until his death in Vancouver in 2003.

Nathaniel Dorsky (n.d.) wrote these reflections for program notes to a Stan Brakhage film series sponsored by the Harvard Film Archive.

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All that was wrong or inadmissible became the very fabric of his expression. Jump cuts, out of focus, shaky hand held shots, flare outs, intimate personal subject matters, underexposures, overexposures, repetitive motifs, rhythms based on the movement of the eye, surface scratchings, visible splice lines, and topping off all that, no sound whatsoever.

The camera itself became the explorer, the protagonist. The filmmaker was released from being a recorder of dramatic representation and permitted to find and promote the pure energy of cinema itself as poetic mind. The individual could now be cinema itself. The very body or muscle of the maker could be expressed and felt. (Dorsky, n.d.)

James Stanley Brakhage exemplifies film as fine art. He worked with the camera as a paintbrush, clay, or saxophone or any other tool of pure expression. The experience of watching films like the 1958 film “Anticipation of the Night” (gsk52cornell, 2012) is like reliving the discursiveness of mixing perceptions, feelings, and the patchwork “jump cuts” of consciousness. The film experience has the elements of an “exposition of consciousness” flow and discontinuity, both fresh and somewhat claustrophobic.

There are many ways Brakhage’s work resonates with contemplative film practice. There is the obvious aesthetic that plays with frames, their relativity and dissolution, but also, in terms of the post-production phase of this work, it paves some ground for how a

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contemplative film might be watched. While “Anticipation of the Night” might be experienced uncomfortably by a viewer, sixteen years later in 1974, Brakhage made “The Text of Light” (mrdisco, 2017), and this film is much more beautiful and non-conceptual in how the visual field is displayed (through a crystal ashtray) as pure dance, movement, and ineffable flow. There is nothing to think about particularly. It is dream-like, diaphanous, and seemingly without a highly conceptual agenda.

He called it a “nervous system feedback of visual music” (absentOhobo, 2010, 5:32).

Below I have transcribed portions of a documentary on Brakhage that I strongly resonated with.¹⁰ Brakhage’s work seems more exclusive to the perception of light, the eye and visual consciousness as the surface of the brain, which automatically includes the full-body neuro net.

From *Brakhage on Brakhage 2* (absentOhobo, 2010)

5:32 The centered focus of my being and of all my making is to discover the process of sight itself, the mind’s eye, not just the shifts and saccades of these little jellied orbs but their limits and possibilities too. And the crossbreed of neurons that make the eyeball so close to the brain, you could call it the surfacing of the brain. The whole innards, not just the brain but as that reaches out to the fingertips along the whole nervous system to create a nervous system feedback of visual music.

¹⁰This documentary is published by The Criterion Collection as a DVD compilation set of Brakhage art and interviews (Brakhage & Brakhage, 2010).

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7:03 [My work was increasingly involved with] the inner receptors of envisionment. Finally beyond the receptors, that is, our optic system, which is receiving what the light spans¹¹ and is focused in on our brain. Beyond that, streamings of unnamable shapes and colors and tones and rhythms, in what I call “moving visual thinking,” which is the feedback of the whole visual system itself in response to what is being spanked in on it with light. And in response to this whole hierarchy of symbols, if one could say left-brain symbolism, signs, numbers and words of course, which tend to delimit one’s ability to be aware of what a “lit candle” human beings just normally are. (absentOhobo, 2010)

Brakhage’s vision of humans as lit candles is a great image of simple energy flow, which resonates with this thesis. Brakhage valued how the universal is always present in the particular, how a simple impression of light arises with the whole being of a person through the neuro network. In Mahamudra language one might speak of outer phenomena and inner conscious arising together in a knowing space of empty cognizance. It is the first yoga of Mahamudra: appearances are mind. Brakhage’s notion of moving visual thinking enters the territory where the outer light and the inner response system are one co-arising. The boundary between outer phenomena and inner knowing of the phenomena becomes necessarily diaphanous.

¹¹ Brakhage uses “spank” to refer to the strong sensory impact of light on the nervous system.

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Brakhage also worked spontaneously. During production he improvised his camera movements, his physical interaction with the light of the world as he was experiencing it. His example caused a shift in my practice. This singular point about spontaneous movement with the camera broke open my particular choice to simply wear a camera as a cue to practicing the Lion's Gaze, and, instead of only being aware of the dance of whatever arose, I could also put my body into this dance as well. A full-bodied exploration of these possibilities for contemplative film practice is beyond the scope of this current project, though I've definitely started down this path. In post-production Brakhage scratched and painted film with a high degree of serendipity, reaching for tools, moving his hand, choosing without choosing, flowing within the tone and direction of the moment.

Brakhage's art feels very similar to the fine grain of my ordinary experience. By fine grain I mean closely tracking the flicker of thought, sense impression (a "spank" in Brakhage language), big space, pure energy flow and fluctuation, with all its insubstantiality and energetic intensity. It is an exposition of the music of consciousness through light.

I think Brakhage is touching a truth. If we think about it, really track it closely, there is very little stable in our visual field. The light is constantly shifting. We have the big arcs of light due to our whirling through space with other celestial objects. The wind moves leaves and clouds which dapple even the flattest surface with shadow dances. Dew, raindrops, pools, and fog filter our light. The movement of our bodies, head, and eye

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parts adds parallax, flickering, tilting. The whole effect is an infinity. There is no end to the forms that light takes in our experience. It is tuning into the unboundedness of who we are as well as the luminosity and wakefulness of our essential nature.

I find Brakhage films a genuine experience of life's ephemerality. There are so many different kinds of beauty in slowly shifting fields of color: sharp jumps to open space, the scratchiness of our eye movements and pokey thoughts, all the dynamics of a symphony of light. Shocking and gently attentive. They reveal the nature of things that are right in front of us. The flow. Unceasing energy. Brakhage's art is like turning your mind inside out. The very fabric and patterning of the film resonates with the cones and rods of the mind's eye so it is like seeing how we see, or how we actually experience things. As he said, "to be aware of what a lit candle human beings just normally are" (absentOho, 2010, 7:03).

Brakhage is all about directness. His work brings the production cue, "things are symbols of themselves." The images are not *of* the world, representing things and people, but *are* the world, they are just exactly what they are: light, shape, movement, and that somehow heals the psyche. Edit points, scratches, "mistakes" allow the mind to remain fresh and non-conceptual to the immediacy of the colors, shapes, lines, and motion. I am reminded of the dharma art teachings of Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche (Trungpa, 2008) and close this chapter with his words.

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You are the biggest symbol of yourself. That is symbolism. Often you don't want to listen to yourself talking on tape, and if you see photographs that have been taken of you, you get embarrassed . . . You are a caricature of yourself and a symbol of yourself. Everything is its own caricature, by itself. That is symbolism on its own, the symbolism of experience itself. . . . Symbolism is based on what we experience personally and directly in our lives: pain, pleasure, or whatever. From that point of view, symbolism is a state of mind. (p. 32)

Chapter 5

The Power of World As It Is: Ritual and Artfulness

Before anything, before thought,

there is s p a c e

This

space is

open,

beyond concept

beginningless

endless

uncreated

changeless

no p—art—s

and yet the ground of all

not blank

charged

everything

*arises **full.***

phenomena are

basic goodness

emptiness and suchness

energy moves light dances

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refracts creates patterns of white

on white light

a dot

appears primordial first

dot expresses

blue, red, yellow, and green

displays of self-awareness

awareness without center or

fringe expresses

itself as constellations of

first utterances "Ahh. Hmm. Ohh."

light like whirlpools

in the river of life

like thunderheads appear in the sky

arise from and enfold back into

the space of all-good

their light and energy

is awareness inseparable

like water and wetness

fire and heat

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Shakti

Durga

Gitche Manitou

Kami

Samantabhadra

Archangels

Yahweh

*basic goodness is in all, yet
the mistake
of separateness
strong taking the ephemeral
and evanescent
as solid*

beings arise as sprites

fairies

entities

plant and animal spirits

demons

obstructing spirits

ghosts

dream beings

mountain gods

fire goddesses

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our bodies flesh bone blood

our sentience

is prana chi aura

coursing through

synovial fluid

channels of light

kami angels spirits dralas run through us

like blood

breath

talk to them!

you might forget!

that they are you

you are

alive with them

in the world

A Review: Pulling Threads Together

Contemplative film practice is the activity of capturing light and sound with the movement of the body, and then dancing with it: playing with sound, music, time, perspective, layering media, and language. Everything in the study is informed by an awareness practice I have labeled the Lion's Gaze, where the practitioner intentionally moves between lenses, enhancing the relativity of lenses, with a particular allegiance to favoring expansive lenses that "watch" or "witness" the *who* that is perceiving.

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The “cues” are a support for practice. They come to mind because you precondition yourself to do so (by calling them cues, for one thing). The words and phrases are conceptual wakeup calls to open up. For instance, an ordinary movement of objects in space can be vivid, magical, and slightly unreal in a way that cues you to check if you are dreaming, to see if things are real or not. You flip lenses on the spot, whatever is happening. Whatever state of mind you are in can flip into something else. Flip into relaxation. Flip out of blinders. Flip into curiosity and interest. Flip into groundlessness. Flip into friction or energy flow.

The intention of the cues is to flip the mind out of centralizing onto itself, freezing the circulation of energy, or hiding from completely unencumbered openness. The intention is to live with a big vivid heart in accord with the experience that we are more *flow* than *thing*. We shift our allegiance to the inherent awareness and life-force of phenomena.

The Buddhist view presented here does not relegate the language of space and energy to merely how things subjectively seem. This is a tradition of intense yogic exploration and attention embodying this view of unencumbered space and unceasing energy, a view that has little allegiance to the conventional duality of subject and object. Relatively speaking the manifestations of this energy are expressed as gods, spirits, fairies, angels, deities, protectors that populate the world’s wisdom traditions. In Buddhist practice this marks an enhancement of meditative technique to accompany the practice of pure perception and the Lion’s Gaze.

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Tantric visualization practice, sadhana practice, understands the deities, the protectors, the mind of the yogic lineage, and our own energetic life force as inseparable from the power of the world as it is. The Three Kayas is a Buddhist description of reality behind tantric visualization, art, ritual, embodiment, and narrative, all employed for exploring and waking up to living patterns of energy in our life. (See Appendix I, The Three Kayas, for a deeper look into the Buddhist yogic worldview.) The remainder of this chapter will connect current arts-based contemplative practices with the spirit of this Buddhist yogic practice. To my sensibilities, the work of these contemplative scholar artists accesses similar artistic and meditative territory to the artistic and meditative terrain of Vajrayana visualization practice. This, in turn, supports why and how current artistic and contemplative practice in research touches a deep level of truth in understanding our humanity.

The following pages look first at the art of contemplative ritual within Vajrayana Buddhist practice as enacting the view of the Three Kayas, and includes a specific example of artistic ritual, the “lhasang” smoke offering ceremony. Then the chapter moves to an exploration of the contemporary work being done among some arts-based researchers, scholars and educators and, as per the third question of this research study, where it might resonate against the backdrop of the Three Kayas, Buddhist yogic rituals, and Mahamudra practice.

The Art of Ritual in Vajrayana Buddhism

The Mahamudra and Maha Ati teachings exemplify the formless style of meditation at the pinnacle of the highest Buddhist yogas. These formless teachings are part of a larger yogic path that includes contemplative meditations utilizing form, shape, color, sound, and narrative. One of the most succinct presentations of these two styles of meditation is found in a short text called “Creation and Completion” by the 18th century tantric master and scholar, Jamgon Kongtrul Lodro Thaye (Kongtrul, 1996). The word “creation” in this text refers to “creation-stage practice” and a special reverence yogins place on creative artistic techniques to penetrate the deepest fixations of ego, enacting the Lion’s Gaze, revealing the empty cognizance present in each moment. The Mahamudra-style of meditation is referred to, in this book and elsewhere, as “completion-stage practice.” The art of ritual, a “creation-stage practice,” is the topic of this section.

Sadhana

Sadhana is Sanskrit for “means of accomplishment.” What is being accomplished is Mahamudra—radical openness, the Lion’s Gaze, or awakening. *Sadhana* is the name given to a guided meditation that comes in the form of a text, a narrative, often in poetic form. While a *sadhana* is something a yogin practices, it is widely understood that the yogin “performs” a *sadhana*. This speaks to the presence and embodiment required as part of the yogic technique of *sadhana* practice.

At the center of most *sadhanas* is a visualization. This visualization is often a creative expression from the mind of a yogin of great accomplishment. The visualization is an all-

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inclusive world: an environment and its inhabitants. Typically the visualization revolves around one central anthropomorphic character, a meditational deity, or “yidam” in Tibetan, which means “sacred bond of the mind.” The meditational deity and the environment is an expression of the yogin’s innate energy, their inner luminosity. Various yidams creatively express a wide range of the mind’s nature; therefore they have a commensurately creative range of visual attributes: multiple heads and arms, clothed in everything from silks and jewels to skulls and flames, to complete nakedness. Sometimes their visage is outrageously wrathful and grotesque with elements of various animals, and sometimes they are the epitome of beauty. The yogin is supported in the performance of the sadhana by a tradition of artist-yogins who render the vision of the sadhana into two-dimensional art for the yogin to refer to in their practice.

The narrative of the sadhana involves the arising of the visualization out of the dharmakaya, much like the poem “Space, Energy and Form” that introduced this chapter. There is extensive movement, flow of light and energy within the sadhana’s narrative, both throughout the environment of the visualization, but also within the form of the central deity and other characters within the environment. The yogin is also a character in the sadhana. Sometimes they engage in the narrative in their ordinary form and sometimes actually *become* the central deity at some point in the sadhana.

There are many more artistic elements to the performance of a sadhana meditation. There are hand gestures, postures, ritual implements, and substance offerings that connect the yogin’s body and ordinary world to the sadhana. There are *mantras* (Tibetan

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for “mind protection”) and melodies to engage the speech. In all the performance of a sadhana bears at least passing resemblance to the richness and detail of an operatic performance. As the yogin is the creator of the visualization, an actor in the performance, and the witness-consciousness overseeing and being transformed by the practice, this is an exemplar of “the portable stage set,” the first cue used in contemplative film practice.

There are very few public documents outlining the details of sadhana practice. One of the most trustworthy is by the great yogin, Kyabje Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche in his book *The Heart Treasure of The Enlightened Ones* (Khyentse, 1992) where he teaches on the different sections of the Chenrezi sadhana, mentioned in footnote 2. I will now discuss a simpler, more accessible text with the qualities of a sadhana.

In the Spirit of Sadhana: The Lhasang Smoke Offering Ceremony

Lhasang is Tibetan for “divine offering,” a smoke offering ceremony that has diverse cultural roots and that therefore lends some cross-cultural context to this discussion. For instance, most people are generally aware that incense smoke, either in the form of frankincense or myrrh, is used in Catholic Mass, and that various North American First Nations peoples burn tobacco, sweetgrass, sage and juniper as a regular part of their sacred activities. The publication I am citing for this discussion is a compilation of lhasang liturgies with commentary and practice instructions by the Nalanda Translation Committee (Nalanda Translation Committee, 2009).

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Originally the lhasang was a native ceremony of Tibetans and other steppe tribes at the Eastern end of the Silk Route, the caravan trail that lead from the Roman Empire to China. Tibetan Buddhists might say that it is a Bon ceremony that has been adapted to Buddhism . . . however this is not the whole story, because it is not only part of the Bon religion. The same ceremony with only slight differences can be found in other cultures throughout Asia. (p.1)

Lhasang is a method for experiencing the vitality of phenomena as inseparable from our own vitality (see for, example Appendix 2). The ceremony physically uses the elements of fire, water, earth, and air in a visceral, experiential, sensory way to invoke their sacredness and consequently the sacredness of the participants. The central deities of “lhasang” are most often “dralas”: a Tibetan word meaning “above the enemy.” The enemy is the illusion of separateness we feel with the phenomenal world, the illusion that our inner mental universe and external physical reality are separate.

The dralas are called down by the smoke and chanting, enter the smoke cord, and descend into the environment. Anything the smoke passes through, the descending deities pass through as well, purifying whatever the smoke touches.
(p.20)

The text anthropomorphizes the elements utilizing imagination, narrative, and visualization as a means to “speak” to our own energy as an external phenomena, and in that speaking, exposes us to greater self-awareness, big mind, agency, and empowerment

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in how we embody our life.

All those gods of the cosmic lineage who command coincidence—
To all of those I offer clouds of real and imagined good offerings.
I offer you this cleansing offering: with kindness please grant your blessings. . . .
May all . . . signs of the weakening and corruption of windhorse be pacified. (p.
6)

The text is meant to have a somatic component as well. As it turns on the imagination it “moves” the participants. The ritual encourages and facilitates open and non-conceptual resting in the physical and psychological space that is co-created within a circle of participants and their environment. It situates the participants in a cosmos where they are engaged with, tuned into, and ultimately inseparable from fire, water, and air.

RAMYAM KHAM

OMAH HUM

From the wisdom of eternal existence

Various trees of divine joy arise;

In the East the rhododendron,

In the South the bamboo,

In the West tamarisk,

In the North willow;

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In the middle the divine juniper tree grows.
With these divine trees we perform our ceremony,
With immense joy and celebration.
Having collected these trees,
We purify them with the nonattachment of fire,
The fearlessness of wind,
And the simplicity of water. (p. 18)

Lhasang Ceremony outlines the detailed “art and performance” for the sequence and style of chanting (p. 26), how to empower personal space (p. 27) and personal objects in the lhasang smoke (p. 28), the use of banners and flags (p. 29), how the assembly moves in relation to the smoke and fire (p. 31), and a written music score (p. 34). The visual details of the personages invoked within the ceremony, dralas, dakas, and dakinis, are generally explained in the oral commentary provided by the leaders of the ceremony.

Lhasang is a relatively simple ceremony in Tibetan terms, but rich in artistic expression. This artistic expression is specifically engaged to bring the Three Kayas into the foreground of experience. The potent relationship between art and deep insight, as actualized in the yogic tradition, deserves connection to current arts-based researchers.

Arts-based, Contemplative Scholars

In my understanding, some of the poets, writers, visual artists (including lens-based artists), somatic movement practitioners, publishing in educational research, are accessing

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strata of reality explored in Buddhist yogic meditations with form. Many of these researchers are working within the general territory of holistic, integrated, contemplative education. As such they are concerned with human development at a profound level. This current thesis study is fundamentally inspired by the integrity, discipline, and courage of their practice and inquiry, and the ways in which the latter accords with my training and practice within the Mahamudra tradition.

As an introduction, I would like to discuss a group of approximately fifty scholars whose work I witnessed at the 2017 Canadian Society for the Study of Education Congress at Ryerson University in Toronto (Walsh, Bickel, Leggo & Conrad, 2017). An aspect of their work that was not readily apparent to me when I read their writing is something I can only describe as “presence.” Often, it looks like they perform their work, but performance as the practice of presence, embodied invocation, meditation, and ritual-as-doorway-to-the-heart. Through my yogic lens they access the openness of space and ride the flow of energy that connects us as humans. These artist-researchers offer a path for how to be in the world. *They enact and support the view that our basic human goodness is not separate from the vividness and power of the world as it is.*

With humility, I am not attempting a precise understanding of the intention and meaning of the following work. I am responding to their work as I experience it through my yogic lens. Ideally, I would have the luxury of discourse with each of them where mutual understanding and appreciation of difference is revealed. Like all art, the meaning is fresh with every witness. Art has its own life cycle and evolves into meaning beyond its

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creator's limits.

The Autobiographical Sadhana of Carl Leggo

I perceive myself as a character in a fiction, in a story that has been made up. I am both present and not present; or more accurately, I witness a person who is both me and not me. . . . My sense of who I am is an effect of language, a sense of presence, a representation, seemingly whole but always fragmentary.

(Leggo, 2010, p. 46)

The autobiographical narrative and poetry of Carl Leggo bears a striking resemblance to the spirit of sadhana practice. I am deeply moved by the fragmentary, almost dream-like liminal zone that Leggo actively explores. His work is to watch his mind as he “stories” himself into existence. This is a deep wisdom: that we are continually coming into being. Leggo (2010) writes, “We know ourselves only in images, written in words and light” (p. 47). This sounds very close to sadhana practice.

Perhaps it is conjecture that I feel another connection between Leggo's deep, heartfelt writing practice and sadhana. Sadhana takes the discovery that we are a continual-coming-into-existence, turns it around, and proclaims that we can intentionally write ourselves into existence with words and light. Leggo seems to resonate with this. The word “existence” means “standing forth from the background” (Existence, n.d.). This is exactly what sadhana does. Using Leggo's words, yogins recreate themselves as an effect of language, visualization, movement and sound. They imagine themselves into existence

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as an evanescent form of self-and-other-inseparable, where qualities like wisdom and compassion are the natural expression.

To witness Leggo use his voice is clarity that he understands presence (Walsh, Bickel, Leggo & Conrad, 2017). His voice is like mantra. His elocution, his vowels and consonants ring the bell of the moment. He stands, extends his body into the space, inhabits and scans the spherical environment. He understands the ceremony of transmission.

The Vulnerability and Awareness of Walsh and Bai

The following are mere fragments, extracted from a penetratingly tender piece of joint writing by Susan Walsh and Heesoon Bai (Walsh & Bai, 2015).

Teardrops fall on my wrists, my fingers, roll onto my lips, drop to the ground in front of my feet. . . . I breathe spaciousness, feel bright pink, a place to expand into, to allow what is. . . . (p. 24)

mirrors universe of mirrors everywhere we turn
a mirror that mirrors other mirrors
is the “mirror” imagery adequate? liquid
diamond liquidity vapors(qi?!!) . . . (p. 25)

My eyes are moistening again. What about me, about her, about us, about this universe

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with unaccountably enormous (here I go again) karmic connectivity?

Each of us, a tiniest mote in the cosmos—

a note in the cosmic symphony! Am I going to go faint-headed again,

Just trying to wrap my head around this scale of things? (p. 27)

Susan Walsh and Heesoon Bai have their individual noble qualities as researchers, writers and fearless explorers of the human condition, but the co-created psychological space they offer in this writing has captured my attention for a number of reasons. First, throughout all the work of this thesis study, for all the decades I've practiced the Buddhist yogas, I have rarely displayed the kind of vulnerability and inner presence found in *Witnessing Witness Consciousness*. The experience of reading this chapter shakes the comfort of my habitual lens on the world by the sheer genuineness flowing from the page. Touching this flow of energy begs either for my openness, or for me to stand aside for a breath to gather courage. Reading this work is a somatic experience for me, which is, in fact, what Walsh tracks as her experience in the writing (p. 29). This vulnerability leaves me groundless, beyond concept. It is inhospitable to the territoriality of my ego. I can not help but wonder how the world might love itself from this groundless place!

Immediately I see new unexplored territory for future work in contemplative film practice. This level of experimental writing practice exemplifies the production and post-production cues of "heart practices" and "generosity" as I've articulated them, but many other cues as well. For instance, "holofractal perception" is how moments, the particular, reveal the universal. I experience this kind of writing coming from this place.

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My second point is probably obvious: Bai and Walsh's artistic and meditative practice includes a highly sensitive antennae and awareness for "other." This writing is so much about attunement to the flow of energy between them as writers. But what exactly is the mechanism of this flow? Language. They are mutually conveying psycho-biological inner experience to each other through words. This is an important point in relation to the sambhogakaya. Communication rides on the sambhogakaya strata of the mental and physical universe. From the Buddhist tantric point of view, words are real energy. They are not merely "subjective." Poetry is not a luxury. Walsh and Bai reveal language as life force. Language changes our body chemistry through the somatic blossoming of meaning and knowing. At the risk of criticism from my Buddhist cohort, I venture to say that this kind of writing is tantric in spirit. Again, "tantra" means continuity. Humans are a continuum of flow, a process, not a "thing." Do I stray into hyperbole? Walsh and Bai open a doorway to the continuity of life that flows through the veins and arteries of the universe. Contemplative film should aspire to this level of practice.

The Dakini's Breath and the Gestare Art Collective

In May 2017, three women associated with the Gestare Art Collective¹² responded to a Mètissage presentation I participated in during the 2017 Canadian Society for the Study of Education Congress in Toronto I referred to earlier (Walsh, Mitchell, Traill, Phillips, Bickel, McConachy & Bartley, 2017). The presentation was a performance of text and

¹² For more information about the members of the Gestare Art Collective see <http://www.gestareartcollective.com/about.php>

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visual art created by four Maritime educator-artists as a contemplation on our work in education and research. In response, the three female respondents moved into the center of the concrete bunker that was our presentation space, invited us to close our eyes and performed a spontaneous, improvised, aleatoric sounding practice, a meditation, an almost shamanistic invocation of the moment.

I have significant experience with this kind of practice, usually at group Vajrayana retreats with a cohort of vajra-yogin sisters and brothers who love this practice of improvised-vocal-awareness in moving prana within and between our bodies. But I have not enjoyed sitting off to the side in witness. This was different.

I did not feel any significant separation from the sound. It became the natural expression of how I wanted to be in my body and mind. The jagged, conceptual flickering in my consciousness, from having just presented/performed a contemplative art piece at my first academic conference, resolved into a space of care and understanding. My chest warmed, tears bled from my closed eyes like a blessing. Curiously, it was an inseparable blend of joy, grief, and empowerment. The soundscape was acting in the world, accomplishing, like sadhana, a transformation of mind and body.

In the audio engineering world there is a colloquial phrase, “head room.” It refers to the capacity for dynamic expression. Without head room, you have nowhere to go. You have reached the limits, both concrete and conceptual, of how you can manifest musically. The experience of their sounding practice raised the headroom of how I envisioned myself as

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an academic to a height I could not have previously imagined. I saw a new possibility for how my work and energy could enter the world.

In resonance with the creative territory of birth, the Gestare Art Collective (“Gestare Art Collective”, n.d.). website homepage says,

Gestare is Latin for the verb "to carry" in the womb. As women committed to living as process artists in relationship with each other, the earth, cosmos and all its inhabitants, we honour and practice gestation as an artful form of inquiry and pedagogy.

These dakini-artists are faithful to ritual and arising artfully in non-linear time. Their allegiance is, in the language of the tantric yogas, the universal feminine principle. Bickel and McConachy (two of the Gestare members) cite Bracha Ettinger’s term, “matrixial borderspace” as their artistic, contemplative playground (Gestare Art Collective, n.d.). The Gestare Art Collective website is a portal to a wealth of multimedia, including film documenting their artistic ritual process. I will look closely at one of these films as a reference point for the work of this thesis study. Before I do so I must briefly revisit the Three Kayas: Dharmakaya, Sambhogakaya, and Nirmanakaya (*see Appendix I for more about the Three Kayas*).

Sambhogakaya energy, as it arises from the Dharmakaya, patterns itself as the pantheon of angels, fairies, deities, local spirits, protectors, and dakinis. In Vajrayana Buddhism, the

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dakini embodies all Three Kayas. Their essence is the indestructible wisdom of the Dharmakaya. In the Sambhogakaya they are bodies of light whose every gesture and accoutrement symbolizes this Dharmakaya wisdom. Their Nirmanakaya manifestation, their most outer form, includes, but is not exclusive to, the female body. The Gestare Art Collective make multiple references to the dakini in their virtual portal.

I think this is appropriate. The most thorough reference to the dakini I have found is *Dakini's Warm Breath* by Judith Simmer-Brown (Brown, 2001). Simmer-Brown writes:

The encounter with the dakini is the encounter with . . . the experience of the ultimate nature of mind in its dynamic expression as a constantly moving sky-dancing woman. (p.42)

Scholars of Tibetan Vajrayana have despaired at her definition, calling the term dakini “semantically ambiguous, multivalent, curious and impossible to pin . . . down or limit to a single definition. (p.43)

When I first discovered Barbara Bickel's work it was her masters study (Bickel, 2004) involving writing on her body, creating a text out of her flesh. I had no ground to understand her work. I understood the words to a certain degree, but I literally had to visualize myself doing something similar before it made impact, though being a white male, this was only a bare approximation. The work posted in Gestare Art Collective demands a similar engagement (Gestare Art Collective, n.d.). I had to prepare myself to extract some semblance of meaning from moving images on a video screen a couple of

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inches square. Primarily, I tuned into the internal feeling tone of my body, letting go as best I could, the obvious judgments and conceptual filters I perceived arising inside the speed of clicking through the web site. The media on the Gestare Art Collective site is a mere smoke trail of an extensive collective contemplative art experience. It takes close attention to pick up the real scent of that experience.

Much of their work is not to be, so to speak, “figured out.” It is to be felt, lived, danced, dreamed. The insight they seek is not just for the conceptual mind. How else, other than by sharing moving images and sound (barring actual presence at their retreats), is it possible to witness the heart of their ritual labyrinth making, dream scrolls, and ocean spirit supplications. Their work is very much like a dakini sadhana.

Simmer-Brown (2001) and I are members of a close yogic lineage, and have extensively practiced dakini sadhanas. Dakini sadhanas are elemental. They embody a cosmic scale for their environment. They protect those passionate about opening, and fiercely spill the blood of ego-hood.

The dakini is, above all, a symbol of embodiment in esoteric yogic practice. There is something natural about a feminine symbol representing the centrality of embodiment in yogic practice. . . . Reflecting her yogic roots, however, the dakini symbolizes embodiment in a slightly different way . . . Her body is beautiful and voluptuous as theirs may be, but it is naked and adorned with shards of bone, skull-cups of blood, and rotting heads, showing her unique

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relationship with embodiment (p.179)

The embodied dakini is an excellent touchstone for the women of the Gestare Art Collective. Resonating with Simmer-Brown, I read with intrigue, as the members of the Gestare Art Collective write about the ecstatic aspect of their path.

The ecstatic, often associated with qualities of the feminine and emergent from matrixially-infused spiritual traditions, can include communally engaged practices such as dancing, singing, art making, process ritual, drumming, shamanic journeying, and trance that generate and raise group energies. This is manifested . . . through the culminating spontaneous performance ritual of releasing the dreams, (Bickel, Jordan, Rose, McConachy & Griffith, in press, p. 11)

I found and witnessed a thirteen minute Gestare Art Collective film, a spontaneous performance ritual of releasing dreams, entitled, *the threads of a dream* (Bickel & McConachy, 2012). My intention was to tune into my somatic experience and reveal for myself its dakini energy spirit. I use an exposition-of-consciousness writing style, right-justified with time code, as a response.

(00:00) They walk out onto the vastness blend of water and sky (00:25). Lines of birds stream through the camera lens, like world prana streaming through their bodies (00:35). They gently regard each other, hold each other's gaze, long past my comfort with men (00:44). The dream scroll is held in four hands. Pressed.

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Caressed. There is love. (1:14). The threads, swatches, dakini rags, invoke, convoke, and question, “Who is moving the wind?” as dakini birds skim the surface of the water close behind them (1:40). The scroll is unfurled like a dreamflag (2:00). Who knows the source of this prayer flag? An art/i/fact of a thousand years? The timeless adornment of Vajrayogini? Beyond word, thought and expression, the toning arises from the morning, the waves, the undefined grey space of the horizon (2:44). Vocal ululations tune their bodies to the moment, dance, synchronize with the wind. The banner, held aloft, flickers with the threads of birth and memory. Pieces of a child’s blanket? Something that has been washed and used and worn out into wisdom? The birds answer (3:15). They thread through the release as if carrying dreams to the dakini realm. Their bodies are swaying with energy now. There is commitment. Their voices coax, quiver, shake (4:14). Yes! This sadhana of dream time release to the elements is real! The rags are a conduit from the heart to the heavens. Please be careful now! Cradle this cloth soaked in heart’s blood! There is no for-getting. There is no-thing to remember. All is precious, delicate, piercing. At once I am playing with my daughter. We giggle. Fly. I kiss her, and she shines bright. Where did that come from? My eyes are brimming, and dakinis flock through the space like arrows to the vital point (5:46). Everything gets slightly crazy, animal tremors daring all fixation and boundary (6:50). And then there is rest. Held by the earth. Refreshed by sleep and silence. The formless fibres, the aura, the subtle bodies are combed, caressed. Such knowing hands. I feel myself extend into the surrounding space. I radiate beyond my skin (8:37). They wait, assess the space

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between themselves. Where did we go? What is left? Call the mothers. Call to their blood and beauty. Their wrinkles, scars (10:42). The dream flag is held aloft.

Reach! It is lineage born fresh. This is what gave me birth. I want to wrap my mother in this cloth. I want her to know. What? That the dakinis are calling to her? She will be cared for? Death is not an end. Pain is not a punishment.

Vividness is its own reward. But we must dissolve the mandala (11:45).

Everything returns. Waves to the sea. Clouds to the sky. Without this I might try to hold on. I want to keep my tears, but I am called to a different simplicity. The scroll is gathered like a coil of joy. A completion without which all might be lost. Reverence has nothing to fear, and yet. They carry the cloth toward me. For me. Through me. Nothing left but to dissolve (13:20). And be held (13:46). What am I to do with this? Can I raise my daughter like this, do my laundry like this, walk to work like this. I am a man. Humbled. I have things to learn. Maybe
now I will sit and watch.

Playing the Space: From Tuvans to Vicki Kelly

Music will likely remain my most well-honed artistic discipline. I have studied it since I was a child, understand its rules and forms and have the widest range of free expression, particularly with wind instruments. During my second visit to India and Nepal between 1980 and 1981, I explored playing Indian flutes in many sacred locations like the Mahakala caves near Bodh Gaya and the Taj Mahal. At that time I was mostly interested in the acoustic properties of these places and using music as a way of synchronizing myself internally. I had not begun to seriously study Vajrayana Buddhism at this time.

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In the 1990's I became interested in Tuvan music and listened to many of the field recordings of Ted Levine (Levine, 2010) documenting the multiphonic throat singing of the Tuvan people who lived around Lake Baikal in Mongolia. At the time I was studying and grappling with an understanding of *drala* as living patterns of energy and the richness of sadhana as a means of communicating with this strata of reality. Levin explains that the Tuvans developed different "songs" for very specific geographical locations: water falls, caves, high points of land. Levin writes that Tuvan throat singing is "not concert music" and is meant as an "offering to the spirits" (p.27) and that "the spirit master likes to hear the sounds of the place or things that it protects. . . . That's why people sing like a river, or like the wind on a mountain, or a bird" (p.28). This was a revelation for me. Once again, it was wisdom from an Indigenous culture that opened my eyes to what was in front of me all the time. Vicki Kelly embodies this wisdom and artistic tradition within the milieu of contemporary scholarship.

I met Vicki Kelly, Indigenous scholar and multi-disciplinary artist, at the ARTS Preconference for Canadian Society for the Study of Education 2017 in Toronto (Walsh, Bickel, Leggo & Conrad, 2017). Within minutes of having arriving she brought me her bear-hide drum and asked me to participate in "creating the space" for the work to be done that day. Her drum was quite small compared to many Indigenous drums I've seen, but the sound had a sort of primordial tonal center. I saw her regard me as I tentatively sounded the drum, imagining her assessing if I knew what I held in my hands.

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Kelly set the tempo, and I drummed while she played an Indigenous flute. I do not know if what she played was a traditional melody or an improvisation. It was quite simple and potent, leaving space for the presence of how she held herself. Her gaze was panoramic, her body gently rocked, swaying to the fabric of the unseen space, and, at least to my sensibilities, had nothing to do with performance as such. It was a convocation, an offering, and an honoring: not only communing with the fullness of the moment, but bringing forth its inherent sacredness for the benefit of us participants. Here was lineage made fresh.

Vicki Kelly (2015) writes about her journey with the Native American flute.

I started to be in the discipline of the wind; I started to visit particular places where I played with the wind, hearing the echoes of my flute off the canyon walls. . . . I learned that art is actually the learning of profound languages, and these languages help us to be literate in the created world. While playing outside in various ecologies of place, I danced . . . with the forces of the natural world around me . . . realizing that I had been searching and longing for this communion all my life. (p. 49)

Communion could describe the purpose of dharma art altogether. Communion in the more fruitional stages of dharma art and the Buddhist yogas becomes continuity and dissolves the boundaries between self and other. I am confident this is equally true of the spiritual art practice of Vicki Kelly, though perhaps expressed with different words.

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How is it possible to separate this kind of artistic practice from the discipline of being fully human? Such attention to the senses, such inquiry into the seen, the unseen, and the felt sense, such discipline, seems primary to the Indigenous knowledge of healing plants, ecology, seasonal patterns, social governance, and models for noble human conduct. The roots of contemplative art practice reach back through to antiquity. They enrich much of contemporary life, and are repositories of insights that could heal our mistaken belief in separateness and isolation not only from each other, but from the elements and the planet.

Our modern passion for truth has revealed incredible knowledge. Many believe we can develop the technology to climb whatever mountain we turn our attention to. But which mountain do we climb?

Perhaps the work of Kelly, The Gestare Art Collective, Walsh, Bai, and Leggo is to point to the mountain.

Reflections on Arts-based Research and Buddhist Yoga

Contemporary arts-based, contemplative researchers have built a tradition of practice drawn from diverse corners of human experience. They have discovered their own unique ways of accessing the actual nature and power of the human condition. One common element they share is the sheer magnitude of their practice—the time on task. Another commonality is how their work has penetrated their life. In this small sample of artist warriors, I perceive very little separation between their work and who they are. I

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have witnessed them all present, witnessed how they bring, command even, the full involvement of their body, speech, and mind to the moment.

I wonder about the backstory of these people I have fleetingly treated in these pages, at how many sidetracks, failures, and second guesses they may have endured. Still, they endured, and with others co-created a hospitable cultural space for educational research and this study. Comparatively speaking, contemplative film practice has a lifetime of exploration ahead of it, particularly in the embodiment, play of the post-production process as a goal within itself.

I wonder about detachment. Mahamudra practice, as it plays out for instance in the cut and thrust of urban life, can stray into detachment and non-involvement when experience gets rough. Frame practice itself—deferring to a larger frame—can be a copout in that a yogin can diffuse the intensity of a situation by giving it space. As a coping strategy, this works. But from the holofractal lens, there is no real separation between staying with the vulnerability of the moment and accessing the groundlessness of the Dharmakaya. From the outside looking in, I sense and value a vulnerability embraced by the researchers reviewed here. They do not seek escape.

The above examples inform this current study in another way. In Mahamudra practice, the practice of the Lion's Gaze, the yogin investigates the location of mind. However, simultaneously, the yogin, through the texts of the tradition, has access to the answer to that question! "Mind is non-local. Awareness is omnipresent and beyond words."

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However, the Lion's Gaze practice is to be uncompromisingly honest about your personal experience. If you feel beset by obstacles, call that out. If you are grieving, then name it. If you feel separate from others, then feel that separation. If you genuinely experience your mind as residing in your physical brain, then that is your truth. The key to the whole practice might be vulnerability. Without vulnerability there is too much ego.

In re-reading the writing in this thesis I notice a tone of proclaiming a certain truth and telling others "the way it is." On the positive side, I have tremendous confidence in this truth, and I have often rendered this view in a poetic manner to allow the reader some space for their own meaning making. However, the artful contemplatives I have chosen to bring to this study emulate a fierce vulnerability. I now see how this fierce vulnerability protects the highest view and authenticity of my Buddhist, artistic exploration of life.

Chapter 6

Taking Stock: Reflections on the Artifacts

Review

When I started this master's program I was quite certain that I would research the educational milieu of a cohort of artist-educator yogins, including myself, who had come to a common, yet enigmatic approach to educating school-age children. As I wrote and recorded I felt I was not capturing the essence of our pedagogy and curriculum. I had been running teacher's workshops for years, and educators wanted to know "how": how did we create our classrooms, how did we deal with specific situations, how did we work organizationally, how did we track the details while maintaining a holistic overview. The answer often came down to, "It depends."

When you pull at one external thread, you see the entire spider's web: everything depends on everything else. Everything matters. The minutiae of each child, their classmates, parents, and the extended environment all held clues to action. How did that come together in a cohesive unity? Something came before the classroom, before integrating art into the curriculum, and before there is the thought of being an educator at all. It had to do with the teacher's relationship to the "web-ness" of the situation: the fabric of energy and space that is the field of play in the classroom and society altogether. My cohort of artist-educator yogin still train in perceiving themselves as part of the web and train in letting go of the personal territory. They renounce that which separates themselves from the warp and weft of every moment. I realized I was inured

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to my personal training and journey, setting it aside in favour of the impulse to offer shortcuts to educators asking for guidance. The “sweet spot” in the classroom was a kind of panoramic awareness.

Panoramic awareness reads the environment, because everything depends. With awareness you can “play” the environment like Vicki Kelly (Kelly, 2015). It involves improvisation at times. Panoramic awareness sees itself. Settles into itself. It is a space that we open up to in the moment. Sometimes it is good for a yogin to habituate themselves to this space. Then when we get in our own way we might habitually, or spontaneously, open up and see the fabric crisscrossing and connecting everyone. Panoramic awareness is something anyone can train in.

Hence, from that training arose the primary themes of this study: direct perception, expanding to bigger frames, self-awareness, responding to the world without guile, feeling “other,” and radiating with minimal self-interest. These are central touchstones of my yogic and artistic training applied to a fresh milieu, and documented in the research process.

The Obvious and the Audacious

In reflecting upon the idea to expand the boundaries of meditative techniques, or to make film with a fresh meditative perspective, it is hard to tell what is obvious and what is audacious. Previously I mentioned the injunction of our teachers to take our training and apply it to all of our activities. Among my artistic Buddhist colleagues there are

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many who have done this and developed music, theatre, dance, writing, and painting as a meditative path. Likewise, Buddhist householder yogins have developed profound awareness practices within politics, business, education, military, organizational development, and raising families.¹³ Anyone can take anything they do and bring it fully into an awareness practice. Nothing needs to be excluded. From this lens, this study about the integration of awareness practice and film production seem obvious.

Self-Evaluating Self-Awareness

Proclaiming your own awareness, however, feels audacious. In the first question of this research I ask myself how Buddhist practice is enhanced by merging it with film production. Then I reflect on how awareness and art coexist throughout the different stages of this kind of film production. It is the nature of a self-study that the experience of awareness be scrutinized. There are at least two graces saving this scrutiny from self-deception. The first is the difficulty deceiving those who know you best, who can keep a practitioner honest. When my practice is thriving, I definitely become more present. I am not necessarily calm or kind per se, because practice can push your hot buttons, disrupt the easy answers, increase your vulnerability. But friends, family, and vajra brothers and sisters can detect a willingness to let go of whatever grip the present

¹³ Secular mindfulness teachings and training are available for all of these sectors, and many of the teachers, consultants, and authors have a range of Buddhist training. David Swick's book, *Thunder and Ocean* (Swick, 1996) is twenty years old, but still provides a narrative of the Buddhist influence on many sectors of Nova Scotian society.

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situation holds, and start fresh in that moment. I keep them at the forefront of my mind when commenting on my experience of awareness through this study.

The second, similar, saving grace is the sacred bond a yogin establishes with the teacher when they receive the tantric and Mahamudra transmissions. I haunt myself by imagining those teachers resting on the top of my head. I am haunted by their Lion's Gaze and Lion's Roar and welcome their scrutiny. Whatever I am doing is a mere shadow in comparison to the freedom and openness of their minds.

Heartfelt Advice To Self

*there is beauty all
around and through
you
sometimes you
feel separate from
it. and struggle play
with this edge
this liminal territory your
separateness
the friction
is
because of your
inseparability who*

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is watching this film who

is having this experience?

where is the "i" that is

watching fire

in slow motion

sunlight on

the water clouds

moving in time-lapse

scanning the vaulted

ceiling of a shopping mall food court

the film stops

there is room

who is

experiencing sound of room

who has the thought

to leave the film

alone, or

hit play again

where

does that thought

arise feel

your inner weather

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body chemistry

be spacious awake cognizant

energetic space

you don't exist

other than this

wakeful space

The Questions

I return to central research questions of this study, particularly the first two.

- In what ways can contemplative film practice reveal and enhance the practice of self-awareness as articulated in the non-dual Buddhist tradition?
- How do the meditative and artistic aspects of contemplative film practice balance one another in different approaches to film?

I have already made the observation that a meditative mindset brings an original eye to production and the work with camera lenses. Practicing true perception, mostly outdoors in this study, increased the wonder and amazement I experienced with ordinary occurrences. This is similar to other dharma artists working with lenses in their practice (Karr & Wood, 2011). Working with a camera as a cue to practicing the Lion's Gaze resulted in almost everything seeming interesting, or at least poignant or

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charged with the fullness of the moment. The world becomes art. From that point of view the production phase of the study was excellent practice.

Reciprocally, empowering the camera as a meditational aid, as a co-conspirator in practicing the Lion's Gaze, gave the practice a wide scale of application. Conceptual lenses are a constant companion in our daily life. Carrying an iPhone as an "empowered" object automatically resulted in a subtle questioning of the perspective I was operating from. The questions came to mind in the midst of daily conversations. How am I situated in this communication? Do I have an axe to grind? Where is the axe grinder? Suddenly I would see myself as the producer of the portable stage set, seeing the whole scenario as an effect of language and crystallized lenses. Immediately this would be accompanied by the slightest relaxation within the moment. My own words and self-importance, and the positions taken by others in the room, took on the playful aspect of puppies tumbling over each other. The puppies are so serious and absorbed in their back and forth, but to us as "pet owners" the situation is more detached and slightly amusing, perhaps mildly annoying if it involves the destruction of favourite slippers, but fundamentally whatever was happening became lighter and had psychological space around it.

The above comments related to the two questions above, are mostly relevant to production and camera work. I want to move from there, to responding to the films as a whole, unpacking the process behind specific moments (the titles are links to each film

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so the reader may follow the time code). I want to see for myself what choices reveal the art-mind and/or meditator-mind at play, asking the second question of the study.

Dreamsign

Dreamsign is an artifact of retreat practice, initially in the camera work and then in the film editing phase. While the film does mix images of urban activities, much of the footage shows slowly evolving ambient natural environments with minimal camera movement and long cuts. The activity of retreat was simply meditation, cooking, cleaning, tending the fire, wandering in the woods, being still within natural environments, watching inner and outer arisings, and writing. In all the activities the central contemplation was the question, “Is this real, or is this a dream? Is there something not quite believable here?” There are a lot of close-ups. Scrutiny is given to the most ordinary phenomena such as the reflections and the dance of light around us all the time.

Flow is clearly a theme. Notice the curl of incense smoke, the inky brush stroke, cream in the coffee, and flames (1:08). The water at the lake shore is slowed down. The burbling of the waves and rocks, and the patterned swells and bubbles is revealed as endlessly fresh each moment (3:48). Walking in the marginal forest space underneath bridges and overpasses I remember the flow of cars over head (5:32). A muddy roar above my head. and wild bush on both sides. The impact of the forest on the retreat experience enchanted the my use of the camera, and in post-production, in memory, I reached for previous footage of animals I’d taken and superimposed them in the film like ghosts.

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There is a shot of the sky (8:08) while lying on a floating boat dock. The ladder for the dock pokes out overhead at an awkward angle. The camera, lying on the dock, rocks back and forth on the flow of the waves, in synch with the ladder and in counterpoint to the flow of the sky. Various city images appear while looking up at the sky. They seem slightly improbable. Out of place, yet ubiquitous. Is this real? Reflections in windows and through windows (9:49) are disorienting, yet beautiful. Suddenly there is a pile of fire wood at by the sidewalk in the middle of the city. Are the colours of the houses too bright to be real?

Working with the dream-like nature of phenomena is natural territory for both art and awareness. I've let this current edit stand pretty much as it arose in retreat. The virtues of valuing a fairly raw video edit are that it can capture a non-conceptual, spontaneous edit. Conceptual elaborations can follow and mix with awareness practice. It allowed a nice balance of art and meditation. In the next film I took more artistic risks.

Holofractals

Holofractals uses more urban footage. Cars and roads figure heavily in it. The film emulates, at times, the jerky discontinuity and speed coming to our consciousness. I explored cutting the images and editing the sound on the tempo of how my attention flickers from point to point, the distraction of my feelings and my own internal dialogue. There was very little conscious planning involved in the initial editing. It was highly improvised and reliant upon chance discovery. What follows are my own conceptual reflections on the film after the fact.

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Once the film was at length and had some music and sound, I tuned in and wrote whatever came up. I felt somewhat detached and let the narrative unfold. When ideas arose they sometimes led to an edit. What this means, I'm not sure. I felt simultaneously like an art critic writing about someone else's art, and the artist surprised by how someone else saw their work. Where were these themes and connections during creation?

A New Edge in Contemplative Film Practice

What I write now, after the fact of creation, is an afterthought of the art as I originally conceived it. Below is a commentary on the film that arose when I watched the film with a somatic awareness of my energy levels. Unbeknownst to me, this creative conceptual response to the film, *Holofractal*, has opened up a new edge to lean into in this research. It is almost like a post-post-production stage.

When I looked for meaning in the film, meaning was revealed as the text of this commentary. Now I see that this commentary on the images and sound is the new organizing principle for another film. It is a narrative. A script. This is a naturally arising process to bring word into contemplative film practice. This text can guide a completely new edit. It could result in a new textual layer in both print and voice over. I feel this "post post stage" should be practiced more intentionally. Perhaps what I have done in post-production is really, from this point of view, a pre-writing process. These ideas bring me confidence that I can take contemplative film production much further into a

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nuanced art form, rather than ambient, reflective sketches. I'm very interested and amused that this commentary looks like a film script.

There are small sections unlike a script—commenting from the side—so I have set them off in square brackets.

The film starts in silence with a self-portrait interrupted with flashes of traffic. I am a traveller, the witness of my own abstraction. I sketch a dream image of a snake, a naga, in time-lapse (0:17). The dream images are my mind. The dream naga appeared as an ally or perhaps an informant. Is this a self-portrait? Diving deeply into dreams is a journey (0:25). We travel the city at night, the forest at night. Lines on the road, shadow lines, fence lines, flash by as the sun comes up.

The forest slowly passes by on the left as I walk down the highway. The yellow dividing line on the highway interrupts the attention (1:35). It is irritating. Painful changes of visual scale. There is still no sound.

[Is this irritation the energy required by keeping track of monkey mind? Or the energy sparking when I'm not entertained?]

No place to rest. The frequency of the edits, the intensity, increases finally cutting to night traffic in the city. Immediate relief. Notice the slight discontinuity in the car receding and then approaching. It has been a long night (2:22). There are gaps in our

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awareness, in tracking the movement of the cars in city. Do we notice the gaps, or only notice when we have returned from a gap? We also hear sound now (3:01). White noise, city ambience, cutting in and out in the night. There is so much energy in it. I swim in this energy. In the city. I feel very sensitive to it now. The ambiances are synchronized with the visuals increasing the intensity of the discontinuity. More abstract self portraits flash with white noise. Self entering along with environment. The self enters with a “SHHH” of traffic. We are jarred by the “SSH” of traffic.

[White noise is ubiquitous. The space of my home echoes with sound—faint but present. The introduction of ordinary city sounds after 3 minutes of silence¹⁴ is a shocking increase in energy. I find this interesting. It somehow unpacks something for me about living within ceaseless patterns of energy.]

Several times, a single note sounds over top of a fragment of a self-portrait (2:58). Relief. A drop in the jagged energy. Golden tones trade places with the city ambience then everything resolves into flowers floating in the sky. The sky scape slowly moves from the car traveling at highway speeds, like the car is a plane, and the flowers are delicate closeups of the camera moving fragile fractions at time. Mixing the parallax of the two perspectives is seductive. Finally something to rest the mind, to entertain. Or just some peace. The reverb of the piano expands into the space. The sound track continues with the sound of my feet walking in typical full stride.

¹⁴ discovered something about watching silent films: I find them pleasant to watch if I turn up my sensitivity to the sound in the space I am in.

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[I remember now: while I walked and practiced with the camera, I often visualized myself expanding into the space. I'd mix my breathe with the sky and visualize both radiating into the world, and partaking of the energy coursing through the space as I travelled. For many miles I travelled.]

Back in the film: I see myself making a sunrise smoke offering to the dralas of the earth, water, and sky. A distant call. You can not quite place the instrument, but it reaches out. Calling? Proclaiming? I also hear my early morning footsteps along with a second video layer of me walking in a field with the sun low in a crystal-clear eastern sky. Maybe the melody is the sky reaching back to me. Filling me.

The sound of my walking continues as the image changes to a night walk in the park, camera moves with my body, the street lights passing to the left. More jagged energy. Continuity becomes disrupted and intensified. The image flashes through different colour filters, then there is the appearance of fire (4:33) from the retreat cabin wood stove, and the sound of water at the lake where I recorded the duduk: the wind instrument. Everything burns like a flame. The sound of the water dances with the flames. The melody returns. There is constant exchange: footsteps mix with the visuals flashing in and out in time with the notes. Cool night, warm fire, flickering perspectives, calling and communing with the forest and lake. I am a multitude, a collection of all of these strata of disparate memory and experience. The image and sound resolve in front of a meditation shrine as the night falls. The gentleness of water and ice at the lake

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shore are a shrine to the completeness of simplicity. The last scene of *Holofractals* (5:27) starts the sound of drums and bass and sky.

A straight up shot of the sky, a long slow arching pan to the apex of the sky turns back around flashing with human constructions. Are they obstructing the continuity of the sky? Are they cracks in the solidity of space? Are they embellishments? Are they artifacts informed by the space they inhabit? The straight lines and geometric shapes have their own abstract aesthetic. Whether disturbing or pleasing they represent a strong force in nature. Nature? Are these part of nature?

[Memory: when I clicked through these images while editing, a little "boom" came to mind with each image. A little jolt. Like the drums of war? Drums of technology? I gathered together and mic'ed an assortment of unique drums from different cultures.]

Unique drum sounds, tonal and reflective, make it difficult to place idiomatically, and gives space for the imagination. Looking at the images and the vastness of the sky pull out the drum. A little earth.

[Then I bring the recording into the video timeline and cut the pictures to the drum beat.]

The bass guitar adds some darkness, or power to the experience. The drums by themselves are actually much more contemplative. The bass adds some kind of

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vernacular layer to the clip. Tough and funky. It enhances the graphic pop art treatment of the wires, poles, and straight lines.

[Is it a bit frivolous? I err on the side of being less precious, and not curating everything within an inch of its life.]

The film ends with the ocean. Sky and clouds. Ocean and waves. Mind and thoughts. Memory. Past is just a memory.

Where Did it Come From?

In all, this kind of art production is fairly gestural. This art is improvisational and random because of its allegiance to the flow-level of inner energy: prana and chi. I do not know where artistic decisions come from. My main lens is being present to my senses, and where I am experiencing energy as I walk around with a lens capturing light with my body—my movement. I let go in the midst of that flow and rest. Then something else might arise in my mindstream, and I move in a new direction, or not. In post-production it is similar. The previous commentary on *Holofractal* arose from watching the images again, and experience my energy and senses while I watch. My body and mind were sensitized to receive the energy of the images partly because of engagement with the studio environment—cameras, graphics processing, musical instruments, microphones, high definition video monitors, and audio speakers. Images and impulses constantly arise on their own as I use the studio. It is a dance: a dance of perhaps matching that energy,

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expanding the energy of a subtlety, pacifying, singling out one strata of the art, going completely sideways to the main flow.

The big umbrella is practice. The dance we have with our own energy should ideally help wake us up. We should at least be inspired to see what hasn't been seen. This is a hard thing to come by: the opportunity wake up to our own energy. It would be a good yoga practice of awareness and art inseparable.

Grappling in Conversation

At some point late in the filmmaking process, another light went on. Another unexplored territory opened up. The films themselves inspired provocative conversation, both within myself and with others. The films incited questions into the artistic process as a whole, and pulled at some unexamined relationships between the different artistic layers and our perceptions and consciousness itself. I sense that these conversations and reflections will inform the artistic expression of this work as it evolves. This is another way the films are not the main result of the research: the conversations, inquiry, and questions around the films are where the energy is flowing for me right now, like the insight in. As an example allow me to offer some of these grapplings on the inner relationships within the art.

Once I have a video timeline, and I have responded to the images musically, an arc begins to emerge. It is mostly an arc of energy levels coming from multiple strata. Two video clips are not necessarily joined because of their meaning. It is just the way the light is

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captured in them. The shadows, patterns, flow: the energy of shape, line, movement and all. The endless display. And of course, memory. I was practicing when I took every shot so I remember the experience.

The flow of energy coming from the timeline inspires insights. I realize the sound of footsteps becomes important continuity between different clips. After all, I'm walking the holofractal highway. Or I realize the editing of the fire at 4:44 of *Holofractals* is very intense.

Disorienting even. I enjoyed the fire-ness of the flashing and colour distortions. But I also see,

conceptually, it is difficult to connect this fire with the previous fire of the smoke offering, and want to foreground the contemplative thread, so I watched the rhythm of the visual imagery and improvised something on the duduk. Somehow the notes synchronize with the edit and bring it into relationship with what falls before and after. I feel the music act as a coordinating strata to the film. It is like role of the consciousness filling in the gaps.

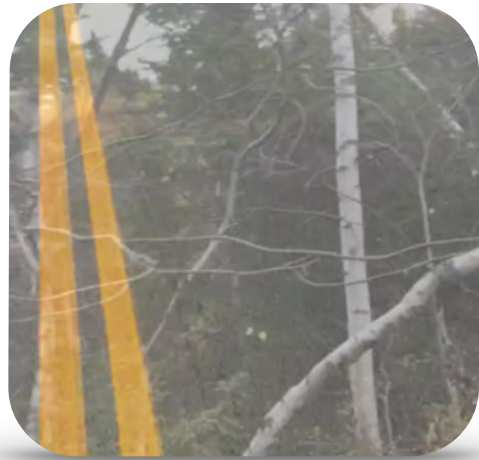


Music as Watcher

In a number of places in *Holofractals*, I edited the video in the jerky patchwork quilt style of what appears to consciousness. The opening sequence has a taste of that, but it gets particularly intense at the forest-and-centreline sequence at 1:23. At one point I decided that the sequence was not working for me so I decided to compose some music there

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(see link below the picture). I chose a multiple-echo synthesizer sound and layered it on top. It seemed to correspond to the centreline track. Then I chose an ambient texture to match the floating forest. Suddenly I was struck by how the music pulled everything together. The jerkiness was now music.



[Link To Extra Music, Holo fractal 1:23](#)

I remember a traditional teaching by Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche (Trungpa, 1973) where he talks about consciousness as the coordinator of the patchwork jerkiness of our perceptions, feelings, emotions, thoughts and mental constructs. Consciousness is “invented” to hold everything together. It is the chief operating officer of the ego. It smoothes out impermanence and the groundlessness inherent in life. This seemed to describe what the music was doing. In the end I took the music out and left in the irritation. The cue with the music included is interesting to compare.



Then I looked at the fire-in-the-night sequence at 4:33. That jerky edit was very intense as well. It also split up the lhasang (3:52) and nightfall in the shrine room (5:08). In this case the musician in me consciously wanted to link the whole minute and a half back together, rather than manicure the improvised twists and turns of the video edit. The duduk

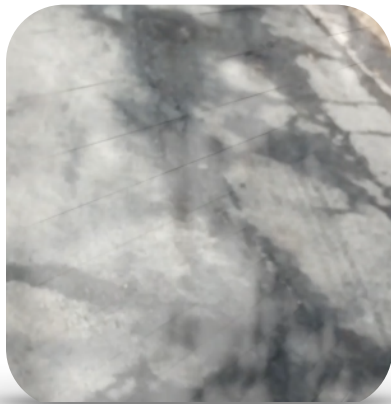
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coordinates the whole sequence and actually matches the rapidity of the flashing fire.

This story of music is also one of lenses. The music is a coordinating voice. It gathers and unifies the different energetic strata of the film, or of experience, so to speak. Taking music out of the film changes the demands on viewing it, but also reveals a fundamental truth. There is a constant friction in our life. It runs through our experience like white noise. At a fundamental level, it is painful. Music is an example of flow, and perhaps it is helpful in that way, but the real flow is right in the friction itself.

Sound

For me, sound awareness was perhaps the richest area of growth in the production phase. This study is profoundly in debt to dharma art and contemplative photography in how to engage the awareness of the soundscapes. Some people who have watched the films notice the dream-like juxtaposition of vision and sound, and to some the audio



track is secondary. Sometimes the audio was present at the time of recording, and sometimes I recreated the aural landscape in the edit suite. At times I made directorial choices to favour the aural landscape over the visual. An obvious example is in Dreamsign (7:05) where I am moved by shadows playing on the side of the house blended with cracks in the road pavement, and

there is an ambulance screaming in the background.

Someone is in trouble. Possibly dying.

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And the leaves are dancing.

The Tyranny of Beauty

The simultaneity of discontinuous perceptions is almost constant in our sensory field. It was shocking to realize time and time again the degree to which we filter out so much of the world around us. I practiced peeling back visual filters by raising the gaze to the expanse of sky, and there discovered the concrete and steel of the urban landscape, or, the charnel ground of wires and electromagnetic fields careening over our heads all day long. Is this a picture of the wires or actually a picture of the sky? The impulse to reduce everything to a narrow narrative, about who we are and what is going on in a given moment, is strong. It is best to develop a taste for opening up. This might mean to rest the mind in the soundscape. Many times while recording video I became aware that the aural space was much larger space than the visual one.



Most of the production footage favours natural environments, which are inherently beautiful. Awareness, however, is independent of such dualities. As I became aware of this inconsistency I questioned what was worth recording, what was beautiful, why it mattered at all, and generally noticing my own discriminations. This led to more footage of things like back alleys, driving in the city, or the old, worn out, and discarded. This was

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good awareness practice if not always translating into the most compelling art. The film *Holofractals* takes modest efforts to explore the fractured, disjointed, mundane, and invalidated. In doing so, life force revealed its presence within all experience.

The revelation of life force and health made a great impact on me personally. I set aside these personal observations as tangential to the focus on contemplative film practice, but now, at the end of the discussion, I feel they do speak to the generative merits of working with film and meditation.

Health

The decision to work with moving images resulted in, well, moving. Specifically, I started spending significantly more time outside, letting my senses take in the environment as I walked. Walking became one of my main awareness practices for over a year. The more I walked the fresher my meditation practice became. At some level what I was doing internally/mentally was the “same old thing,” but it brought it to an endless field of play, a vast unfolding world. The more I walked, the further I was able to walk. I hit physical limits that continued to expand over time.

When my body started to ache, I consulted a somatic movement therapist trained in Body-Mind Centering (Cohen, 2012) to teach me how to walk. She looked at my muscle firing patterns and taught me a succession of cues to bring myself into conscious awareness of my body while I was wandering various cities and countrysides with my camera. I learned that I do not feel the balls of my toes when I place my feet down. So I

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started to do that. Suddenly my feet began to feel with a similar acuity as my hands.

There was a whole new realm of articulation and nuance revealed in how I could touch the earth. Then I was taught to follow each physical step through to the point when my back foot gently pushed forward as my front heel came down. Eventually, because I was in contact with the earth more, I felt like I was gliding rather than stomping through the world.

I researched and bought new shoes. (They are completely worn out now, and I just bought a second pair). I chose shoes with flexible soles that didn't extend out beyond the width of my foot, so that I could feel more of my natural contact with the earth. After each walk I would take time to massage my feet. I noticed how my whole body woke up whenever I worked my thumbs into my soles and toes. My feet became more supple, and the skin looked healthier. I started to feel parts of me that I did not realize I had not been feeling for a long time.

As the weeks and months went by I started to have knee problems. My somatic movement therapist, who is also a yoga instructor, explained the need for stretching my quads and hamstrings. After much resistance I eventually habituated myself to four or five simple stretches at the end each walk. When practicing a forward bend I noticed my balance was very shaky. Curious about this insight, as I walked I found opportunities to walk on logs, curbs, borders, and climb on children's playground structures. Now I find that I can scramble, scamper, scoot, and scuttle about. I felt like I have gained back at least ten years in age.

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The more I appreciated the practice of capturing light with my camera lens, the more I walked. The more I walked, the more water I drank, and the less I wanted to eat. Periodic headaches cleared up. Eventually I was walking six to ten kilometers per day. Soon I started to sort of shuffle-run without ever losing contact with the ground. Because I was wearing a camera I became aware of how smoothly and effortlessly I could shuffle-run. Over time I reached a place where I was jogging. I never made it a “thing,” or got goal-oriented about it: I just jogged until it stopped feeling good. I am now sixty years old and have not enjoyed running since I was in my early twenties. I lost fifteen pounds, and my cholesterol and blood pressure are down.

It is difficult to ascribe clear causal relationships to all of this. I am sure there are many change factors in my life that came together in this story. Nevertheless, I have spent a significant portion of the last year applying a life of Buddhist training towards the art of film, and it has been accompanied by a substantial shift in my overall health, to the point where I am able to physically show up in the world in a way that I haven't been able for over ten years.

New Ground to Move Outward

As I write at the close of this paper I feel impelled into the next arising in my life. Am I standing on new ground? Am I in a different place than when I started this research? Of course, change has happened, but there is continuity too. Right now my ground feels charged with the view established at the very beginning of this research. The strength of

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that view empowered everything I did with the possibility of waking up: waking up to my inherent nature. The artistic sensibility opened a doorway for awareness to enter the fabric of perceptions and consciousness. The felt sense of living, activated by both the art and the meditations, became the pigment and painting of endless display. I actually feel stronger as a result of this work. I allow that to be some measure or testament to the practice of the esoteric Buddhist yogas.

I am equally impelled by a wobbly feeling in my artistic ground. Like I am a newborn moose still wet from birth. Knees buckling. The little nubs of horn on my head tender in the air. Yes, the ground is wakeful as this moose learns to stand, like the film artifacts of this research. *Dreamsign* and *Holofractals* are sketches of improvisation and chance. They outline compelling conversations about our lived experience:

the nature of consciousness,

the openness of perception,

the fickle flickering of senses, feelings, thoughts, and watcher,

the energy of music, sound, and silence,

the capacity for the mind to flip into a bigger frame.

These conversations should impel contemplative film practice into its into childhood and beyond.

In service to moving outward with this work I aspire to a full collaborative life for contemplative film practice. I say, bring together all the combinations of poets, movers, storytellers, painters, performers, and musicians in their multi-coloured capacities for

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expression. Mix in the camera-as-watcher, mix in the Lion's Gaze. Cross pollinate. Let us give birth, and bring significance to the mixing different streams of wisdom and awareness.

It is significant to me that I accessed, through the yogic lens, a strong resonance between the work of various arts-based contemplative researchers and the power of the world as it is. I am now impelled in my Buddhist yogic practice to explore the yoga of poetry, the yoga of storytelling, the yoga of performance, and the yoga of witnessing. This may be of consequence for Buddhists aspiring to take their practice beyond the meditation cushion and into the manifestation of a sacred world. I invite them to watch these films, read my reflections, and share their experience.

What is the significance of this work for contemplative arts-based research? Is it of consequence that an artist attends to bare perception before concept? Is there room for mixing the profundity and power of words with the Lion's Gaze? Does the Buddhist understanding and experience of space and energy as the primordial sadhana bring vitality to contemplative arts-based research?

I am internally exhorted in multiple directions to gather these collaborators—artists and meditators—in retreat situations, working through virtual portals, or regular meetings within daily life. I want to tune my body to our collective presence and allow whatever spontaneously arises to be an expression of our sanity. I want to learn from their display

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of noble qualities, and encourage the energy of our work to never centralize, mixing our unique languages into common soil—the heart level of experience.

Let us be in synch with the way things are. Let us not hold on to our small lenses. Let us be woken up by each flash of colour and splash of water. Let us see our life as spontaneously arising art. And we will continue to paint the world the colour of love and wisdom.

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Appendix I

The Three Kayas

“Kaya” means “body.” The “three kayas” are the three bodies of awakenment or the three enlightened manifestations of Buddhanature. Dharmakaya can be translated as the “truth body,” Sambhogakaya as the “enjoyment body” and Nirmanakaya as the “form body.” The Buddhist account of the three kayas describes the enlightened view of reality; that is, how a mind free of fixation sees the true nature of things. One practical application of the three kayas framework is as a meditative guide to glimpsing mind’s true essence, free of conceptual fixations and elaborations, boundless like the sky.¹⁵

The First Kaya: Dharmakaya

Dharmakaya means “truth body.” The foundational background of everything is the openness of space which is described as “empty.” The teachings on emptiness are vast. One expression of “emptiness” is simply that everything is “empty” of the words, thoughts and expressions we put on them. “Dharmakaya” thus refers to completely non-dual space before thought or manifestation. However, because this space is effulgent, because all energy and form manifests within this space, reality is not empty in the usually conception of simply nothing. This is emergent space. Everything constantly emerges and enfolds back into this space (Bohm, 1998). It is the fundamental nature of our natural world and our mind. It is utterly empty of our conceptualizations, yet our conceptual mind partakes of this secret nature as it arises out of it, it is “made out of it,” so to speak (Kongtrul, 1996).

¹⁵ Kongtrul, 2005, p. 383, Note 40

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Buddhist meditation practice has a unique allegiance to pointing out the Dharmakaya to the practitioner. Whatever arises in meditation is seen as utterly fresh in its impermanence and evanescence. In the Shambhala language this is called “basic goodness” (Trungpa, 1983). “Things” are found to be without substantiality and inherent existence, yet the vividness of the mind, the senses and phenomena are undeniable. *Indeed, their basic goodness gains clarity when free of the filter of conceptuality.*

Tuning into the Dharmakaya dimension of experience, and all the three kayas, brings wisdom to our hypertrophic fixation on “self.” The more we indulge the illusion of our own solidity, the more we are out of step with reality and the more suffering we create for ourselves and the world. Taking that which is ephemeral as enduring causes ignorance and pain. This is the great mistake of the modern self which Gregory Bateson has coined “the error of separateness” (Bateson, 1972). We generally see the universe as made up of separate enduring entities simply because we name them and then believe in the name—the thing—rather than the actuality of constant change.

The dharmakaya, in the yogin’s practice, involves being alert to any tendencies to fixate or solidify situations, instead seeing these as opportunities to relax into a bigger perspective. This is interesting given current social and cultural discourse on topics such as sex role stereotyping, gender fluidity, and racial profiling. From the point of view of the Dharmakaya, any concept that attempts to pigeon-hole the reality of someone’s lived experience will never capture the true essence of that person. The Buddhist view of the

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Dharmakaya supports seeing the world without limiting labels and categories. Dharma Art, and the Lion's Gaze in contemplative film practice are examples of how to actually work with perception and awareness of limiting lenses and frames.

The Second Kaya: Sambhogakaya:

The formless aspect of reality, Dharmakaya, naturally gives rise to a flow and dance of energy. This includes the realm of "inner" experience: emotions, thought-forms, patterning, vividness, the energy of our inner landscape, the display of perception, color, light, quality, consciousness and communication, which form and play within boundless space. This is the territory of "prana," and "chi," the province of yoga and various holistic, and intuitive healing arts. The completely wakeful manifestation of this energy is the "Sambhogakaya" or "enjoyment body," described as "inner radiance," or intrinsic awareness-and-emptiness inseparable (Dorje, 1991, pp. 278-279).

Prana and *chi* are important concepts that deserve a few more comments. The expression of energy, as we know, can be open and clear, or can be frozen, self-centered and the source of great pain, fear and anxiety. In fact, much of the experience of human suffering is the result of not understanding the nature of this inner energy; we take that which is ephemeral and try to make it solid. In the Buddhist, Hindu, Taoist understandings, *prana* flows through the *chakras* (centres) and *nadis* (pathways) of the *subtle body* (Karmapa, 2014). The ordinary body experiences this as subtle, visceral sensations, feelings and instincts: the movement of thought and emotion arising and falling through the otherwise unobstructed sky of our mind like clouds, lightning, or dust

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—the limitless displays of communication, meaning, quality and vividness arising as an implicate order (Bohm, 1998) of inner experience and the outer phenomena (Trungpa, 1991).

All of the gods, goddesses, spirits, and formless entities throughout culture and history are expressions of this same energy. They have no separate independent existence. This whole realm of human experience, including myth, spirituality, and psychic phenomena, percolates on the fringe of modern culture as an archane, anachronistic vestige of antiquity or religion. In the Buddhist, shamanist, tantric cosmology, our inner energy is part of a flow that runs equally throughout the environment and phenomena and manifests *all manner of entity-like phenomena*. These are, in essence, inseparable from the luminous and non-local forms of our wakeful inner energy. These entity-like phenomena manifest in the form of angels, the Shinto Kami, enlightened protectors, goddesses and gods, presences made of light, dakinis, and dralas.

The Third Kaya: Nirmanakaya

The Nirmanakaya, “form body” is essentially our familiar world of form, function, time and gravity where objects act in accordance to Newtonian physics: this is Bohm’s “explicate order.” Dharmakaya, Sambhogakaya and Nirmanakaya describe an intertwined continuity of space, energy, and form that unfold as both mind and outer phenomena (Hayward, 1998, p.192; Kongtrul, 2005, p. 183). When you engage the sensory world of form with great wisdom and openness, flow and connection, then a “big mind” perspective on life emerges. Glimpses of the energy of Sambhogakaya is revealed and

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the explicate order, the Nirmanakaya, is experienced as arising out of it.

In our self-absorption we disconnect from the world and struggle with things being either for me or against me, and the explicate order, our ordinary world of phenomena and self, becomes a narrow reality of hope and fear with narrow options for gaining temporary happiness.

In sum, the Buddhist teaching of the Three Kayas illuminates the claim that *human wisdom and potential are not separate from the power of things as they are*. There is open space, flow of energy, and form. Everything partakes in all three simultaneously. Grasping this experientially frees us from the bizarre notion that humans are a separate flea on the bottom of the universe just trying to stay alive. Seeing experience as the Three Kayas reveals the possibility that we could open into the radiant space of the Dharmakaya, the fluid dance of energy of the Sambhogakaya, both of which bring awareness to the utterly impermanent, transitory, and effulgent world of form.

Appendix 2

Children's Earth Day Lhasang Chant

Spirit of the Wind and Air come to this place. You are in our breath. You cool our skin and make us move.

Spirit of the Sun and Fire come to this place. You are the heat in our belly. You are our passion.

Spirit of the Ocean and Water come to this place. You are our blood. You are the flow of nourishment.

Spirit of the Planet and Earth come to this place. You are our bones and muscles. You allow us to stand, give us a home.

Spirit of Space come to this place. You are our openness. You accommodate everything.

Spirits of the Elements, we have forgotten that you are what we are made of.

So, for the moment, let us talk to you as if you are separate from us.

May this remind us that our care of you is the same as our care of ourselves, our families and everything that we love. May we always remember that there is no happiness

if you are not happy.

May our care of the earth, water, air and energy not be a hassle, but be joyful and delightful.

Ki Ki So So

(Traill, 2014)

Appendix 3

Energy Intensity Levels

I want to explain a framework I use for studio work: for editing, composing, and generally appreciating art, music and theatre altogether.¹⁶ This artistic framework is helpful when working with a camera, but in this study it is brought to the foreground when layering complex media into moments and scenes.

The lens of *energy intensity levels* can be used with any art form and favours attention to energy levels rather than concepts as the organizing principle. The approach is to understand film as composed of many strata, frequencies, patterns, or threads of energy. And all the layers of energy collectively create an overall temporal arc. Each moment can also be looked at in terms of its layers, each layer with its own intensity. As an artist you can do a lot of your work and decision-making in playing with the energy levels of these different layers. In collaborating artistically with others I have used a simple numbering system with 1 representing low energy and 5 being highest energy. The concept is simple when describing a painting or a piece of music. The painting has colour, shape, line, texture, negative space, and each one of those elements can have more or less prominence in a painting. Together these elements create pattern, movement, flow, dissonance, harmony, space, chaos. Music is likewise made up of rhythm, melody, harmony, tempo, timbre. Indian ragas have high-intensity melody but low-intensity

¹⁶I learned this technique from a close member of my family who works in dance and theatre. She learned it at some point during her Bachelor of Arts program at Naropa University in Boulder, Colorado.

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harmony. Classical western music has high-intensity harmony, but relatively low-intensity rhythm.

A moving image has its own layers in terms of shape, colour, speed, movement, pattern, frequency, arc, tone etc. The edit—cutting up the linear image—adds another layer of energy. There can be different visual layers on top of one another, and the energy of each of those layers is also changed with visual processing and effects. The original production sound—the sound captured on the camera when recording—is one layer of audio. Add on top of that layers of improvisatory musical response woven with extra sound design.

Each of these sensory imprints is carried on energy. Our world is made out of it. This lens for making art keeps the process allied with the ability to tune into energy at a non-conceptual, visceral level. Making art this way actually trains the artist to feel flow in the environment. This is one way to explore the inseparability of art and meditation. I am thinking again of the first two questions of this thesis, “In what ways can contemplative film practice reveal and enhance the practice of self-awareness as articulated in the non-dual Buddhist tradition? How do the meditative and artistic aspects of contemplative film practice balance one another in different approaches to film?” The energy intensity lens is embodied training in experiencing the openness of space charged with unceasing energy. Abstractly at least, this sounds like the inseparability of art and awareness practice! A closer look at some of the actual art will bring the abstract down to earth and reveal a messy back and forth as per this nascent experiment.

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I think it is worthwhile to contemplate the relationship between improvisation and chance and the energy intensity lens. The training aspect of improvisation allows the artist to move with the energy. Improvisation is not often just making something up to stand on its own. It is to dance with a partner, which is the energy. Random action—reaching blindly into a digital folder for a clip of video, shuffling regions around on a timeline—refreshes the mind. It is easy to get into a limiting pattern artistically. Chance occurrences in the studio, like mistakes or thoughts from out of the blue, may open the door to something as of yet unseen.

In true meditation, there is no ambition to stir up thoughts, nor is there an ambition to suppress them. They are just allowed to occur spontaneously and become an expression of basic sanity (Trungpa, 2008b, p.13)

Another layer: Film brings with it the memory of that experience, a visceral imprint of the original experience. A feeling inside your gut, or something moving along the spine. There will be an emotional colouring to some of the images. Difficult to tell the level of self-projection or awareness sometimes, but basically its a fabric of internal pressure in a various directions and places that you can ride. This body memory is activated when digging into the video library for inspiration, because it is yet another layer of emotional energy.

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Activating a certain amount of emotional energy make my body much like a tuning fork that rings as moments unfold. The tuning-fork body responds to whatever arises.

For an example of this energy level approach let us look at *Holofractals*, frame 2:49 below. The edits in this cue are irregular and frequent. High energy. The bed track of video



is visually high contrast with a black background and points of light. More high energy. Colour is low energy. The camera is jerky, making the intense lights jump. This cue is where sound is introduced for the first time in the film, so that is a

new layer of energy. The second video track of abstract art uses strong lines and angles in an intense facial expression. The edits of these faces are synchronized with white noise in rapid fire, but irregular succession. More intense energy. At the time of creation, after randomly placing the abstract self-portrait on the city intersection it felt like a beaming energy. Energy with a strong directionality. When the ambiances came in, it was like space itself was beaming non-locally. So I synchronized them.

Contrast this with frame 3:21. Very spacious. There are two simple layers of video. One is out the side window of a car on the highway. It has one high energy thread in the speed it shows on the bottom third of the screen. The second video layer is a



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green screen of a bed of flowers. The camera movement is delicate. Floating like the tiniest fly. The overall colour energy of the moment is simple as well. Blue, white, and a dark strip at the bottom. Splashes of yellow. There are no edits. Relief. The combination of video layers does generate high energy from the patterns and parallax of sky and flowers. There is a music layer here as well. One simple note at a time on a processed piano sound. The rich, smooth, rounded tone also has strong energy, but with soft edges and filling all kinds of space.

The energy intensity lens for making and relating to art is not an exclusive practice for me. There are other artistic-contemplative lenses that come up when I make art. Certainly, I work with the elements of fire, water, earth, and air in these films. In other art projects I've favoured "heaven, earth, and heart" as an organizing principle. May the ways be endless and may writing these words mean that a wealth of already existing insights into art and awareness practice be shared.