



## Vision and Visuality in Buddhism and Beyond

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

*Before I had studied Zen for thirty years, I saw mountains as mountains,  
and waters as waters. When I arrived at a more intimate knowledge,  
I came to the point where I saw that mountains are not mountains,  
and waters are not waters. But now that I have got its very substance  
I am at rest. For it's just that I see mountains once again as mountains,  
and waters once again as waters.*

(The sayings of Chan-master Qingyuan Weixin of Jizhou recorded in the *Wudeng huiyuan*, j. 17 and *Zhi yue lu*, j. 28; transl. by Alan Watts, in: *The Way of Zen*, 1971 [1957], p.146.

### Workshop outline

Buddhist terminology abounds in visual metaphors. The extensive use of visual imagery, besides its efficacy for transmitting the Buddhist doctrine (*dharma*), attests to the primacy of vision in Buddhist theories of perception and cognition. The Sanskrit term for 'perception' itself, *pratyakṣa*, literally means 'in front of one's eyes'. Knowledge attained through perception, especially visual perception, is recognized as an essential component in the process of cognition in Buddhist epistemology.

Vision and visuality were thus often taken as paradigmatic examples in numerous analyses of sensual experience found in Buddhist teachings. It is evident from these analyses that visuality is essential in both its function of constituting the conventional world of experience (Skt. *rūpadhātu*, Chinese/Japanese 色界), and in attaining a clear vision into the truth of the world *as such* (Skt. *dharmadhātu*, Chin./Jpn. 法界). It therefore seems that an inquiry into this twofold function of visuality in Buddhist texts may further our understanding of Buddhist conceptualizations about the nature of the world. References to Buddhist theories of perception and visuality, their specific terminologies and metaphorical vocabulary, are recurrent throughout epistemological and aesthetic reflections in East Asia. This is true even for texts that do not explicitly relate to a Buddhist context. Important theoretical inspirations include the 'mind-only theory' (*yogācāra*, 唯識), the 'theory of perception' (*pratyakṣa pramāṇa*, 現量),

and influences from other Buddhist schools. The use of particular terms such as 觀 ('inspection/observation', Skt. *vipaśyanā*, *vidarśanā*) indicates a conscious reference to Buddhist contemplative practices and methods for attaining a kind of knowledge that transcends the senses.

East Asian authors, reflecting on the relationship of cognition and perception, of genuineness and illusion, of emptiness and appearance, seem to have expanded the creative potential entailed by Buddhist views on visuality. For instance, the Chinese literatus and lay Buddhist Li Rihua 李日華 (1565–1635) elaborated a theory of pictorial order as a visualization of different levels of consciousness, which he explicitly interpreted in terms of 'mind-only theory' (Li 2010: 287, Lukicheva 2016). Examples such as this illustrate how the visual in its role of mediating between different levels of consciousness emerges as an important topic in aesthetic reasoning.

It is probably due to the emphasis on language, concepts and the discursive analysis of the doctrine in Buddhist studies that less attention has been paid to the use and specific significance of visuality (but see, e.g., Wayman 1984, Eckel 1992, Kinnard 1997, McMahan 2002, Kapstein 2004, Jamabe 2005 and Rotman 2008). This may be one of the reasons why a more thoroughgoing assessment of its implications for East Asian theories of cognition and aesthetics is still by and large lacking, and it is true in spite of both a well-established tradition of Buddhist art history and recurrent, yet typically rather loose allusions to "Zen Buddhist" topoi in East Asian art and art history.

The proposed workshop intends to focus on such aspects of Buddhist theory *and* practice where visual perception and visuality play a central role, including both the metaphorical functioning of visual imagery as well as cases, where actual visionary experiences are discussed or evoked. Consideration of both the Buddhist conceptions in their original discursive contexts and their adaptation and transformations within the broader fields of epistemology and aesthetics in East Asia are bound to reveal new insights into the nature of visuality and its creative potentials. It is our hope that these findings may provide innovative perspectives, prone to complement the common emphasis on linguistic-categorical aspects in Buddhological scholarship. At the same time, we endeavour to take a first step towards establishing a philologically grounded and philosophically argued foundation for a critical discussion of the uses of the Buddhist conceptions of vision and visuality in their wider epistemological and aesthetic contexts.

The following questions may illustrate the possible range of workshop contributions and discussions:

- What is the role of the visual, its modes and mechanisms, in analyses of perception in Buddhist and Buddhist-influenced traditions?
- What role do visual metaphors play terminologically, especially in the domains of perception and cognition?
- How is the relationship of vision and knowledge conceived?
- What is the place of perception vis-à-vis the discursive and conceptual? How does it relate to the much-debated contrast of "appearance" *vs.* "reality"?
- What is the connection between theoretical analyses of vision and perception to artistic practices?
- How are Buddhist views on the relevant topics adapted to non-Buddhist contexts?

- How do Buddhist or Buddhist-influenced reflections on visuality relate to other theories of vision (e.g. those of the Mediterranean antiquity and the medieval Europe; of phenomenology and cognitive sciences)?

The workshop will bring together specialists engaged in studies of Buddhist theories of knowledge and contemplative practices in India, Tibet and East Asia with specialists working on the reception and manifold adaptations of such theories beyond the immediate Buddhist contexts. As discussants we will invite experts in linguistics and visual theory, as well as psychology and philosophy from the University of Zurich and other Swiss institutions (e.g. ETH, Zurich; NCCR *eikones*, Basel).

The organizers hope that a detailed investigation of the functions of visuality from the perspectives mentioned above will not only lead to a better understanding of its role in Buddhism and related theories of cognition and aesthetics, but that it will also provide a basis for discussions of visuality as a cultural phenomenon in a wider framework. This pertains to fundamental aspects of the construction of reality, to the function of visuality in attempts to transcend the sensual in order to attain a “vision” of the absolute, and, eventually, the creative potential of the contrast between “genuine” and “illusionary” in visual arts.

## References

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