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# RE-VISIONING ETHNOGRAPHY THROUGH MEDITATIVE PRACTICE:

## The Proposal for a Contemplative Anthropology and Its Experience through Visual Elicitation Technique

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Keywords: *Contemplative Anthropology; ethnography; visual elicitation; mandala images; Consciousness Studies; meditation experiences; subjectivity boundaries.*

Abstract: *This article introduces a novel method presently in development that integrates ethnography and visual elicitation techniques to explore meditative experiences and investigate consciousness. Central to this method is the utilization of mandala-like images as a means to capture the dynamic evolution of consciousness during contemplative practices. The utilization of mandala drawings has been extensively developed in psychological study inspired by the work of C. G. Jung. In this study, I will elaborate on how this methodology has been adapted to suit the needs of qualitative ethnographic research within the framework of a visual elicitation methodology tailored to studies on meditative practices. This article provides an illustrative case study that scrutinizes the method's potential applications and contributions within the domain of anthropological research on contemplative practices. The study critically examines the method's historical evolution, signifying a notable shift in ethnographic focus toward meditation, and probes the dissolution of subjectivity boundaries that is inherent in meditative contexts. The research methodology is rooted in fundamental principles emphasizing participants' direct experiences in meditation, the iterative construction of multistage mandalas, and a purposeful departure from conventional artistic norms during the drawing process. The present case study serves as an illustrative portrayal of the visual data derived from meditation sessions, offering insights into the transformative nature of contemplative experiences.*

“When a person sees, he sees name and form, and having seen, he will know only such things.”  
(*passaṃ nara dakkhati nāmarūpaṃ, disvāna vā ñassati tānimeva*, Suttanipāta 4.13)

### 1. INTRODUCTION TO CONTEMPLATIVE ANTHROPOLOGY

The illustration depicted in figure 1 represents a mandala (IAST: *maṇḍala*). However, it was not created by a monk or a seasoned artist trained in the Buddhist artistic traditions of any of the East or Southeast Asian countries. Other, similar drawings presented in this article are entirely the work of novices and do not aspire to be considered works of art per se. Instead, this visual methodology serves as an innovative meditative exercise inspired on one hand by the Jungian tradition and on the other by the proposition to revolutionize ethnographic studies through the integration of contemplative practice. These two aspects will be briefly discussed in this article.

The illustration presented herein has been developed through iterative phases of introspection, leading to the visual depiction of experiences amassed during a contemplative practice



characterized by diverse stages. Showing this image serves as a preliminary representation, indicative of one of the prevailing outcomes emerging from this meditative work. In my endeavor to create it, I chose to engage in three meditation sessions over the course of a week. At the conclusion of each of these sessions, I took time to relax and reflect on the experiences I had during the meditative exercise. Following this, I undertook a secondary, more casual contemplation endeavoring to spontaneously capture on paper the experience I had undergone. The representation was generated promptly without deliberate consideration of explicit symbolic intentions and by instinctively and genuinely conveying what I felt compelled to communicate after meditation.

Certainly, the interpretation and conceptualization processes are nearly automatic mechanisms inherent to human nature. Nevertheless, what distinguishes this study on images generated during meditative sessions is the explicit requirement, as an additional contemplative exercise, to diminish any form of interpretation, judgment, or conceptualization regarding the nature of these images.



Figure 1. Autoethnographic mandala, courtesy of the author

This experiment—of which I am presenting only one case study here (besides the digression on my autoethnographic experience)—is the culmination of a multiyear ethnography and is a research project centered on the study of consciousness through contemplative practices. The

example I am showcasing represents one possible application of this method to oneself, serving as a form of contemplative autoethnography that utilizes visual elicitation to better illustrate meditative experiences. Participants were encouraged to express themselves freely through the visual device, maximizing spontaneity to the fullest extent possible.

In this article, I will elucidate how this methodology was developed and applied to ethnographic investigation and how it can advance the anthropological study of contemplative practices by providing an example of one of the individuals who participated in this study and showcasing various mandalas he created through meditative practice. This in turn will show how he contributed to a more detailed formulation of the research methodology, which will be articulated more fully in the form of a larger research project.

Since 2018, I have been conducting ethnographic research on meditation. Initially focused on the clinical and therapeutic aspects inherent in meditative practice, from 2021 onward my ethnography shifted its focus to another dimension, namely meditation itself. Born out of the need to study consciousness and the experience of being-conscious within the individual, this ethnography explored contemplative experience through an anthropological lens, not confining itself solely to mindfulness or meditation practices associated with a particular Buddhist group. It was decided, in fact, to broaden the understanding of contemplative practice to encompass any meditation exercise that centered not only on concentration but also on introspective inquiry into consciousness.

The results of this second phase of research proved to be quite consistent across all participants. Self-contemplation and meditative reflection on the self and consciousness invariably entail a deconstruction of the sense of the self's independence, specifically the experience of subjectivity as a self-centered phenomenon distinct from alleged other selves. This phenomenon manifested in various subjects, including meditation novices or those who engaged in highly personalized forms of meditation. In each case study, the contemplative practice was scrutinized as a method for exploring "profound dimensions," as the experience was sometimes described by subjects of these studies, thereby elucidating the subjective experiences that emerged when, upon attaining a specific state of focused attention, the individual's awareness shifted toward realms that could be characterized as transcending conventional psychological frameworks and encompassing the transformation of aspects ranging from identity to sensory perceptions. This, of course, is possible only if one accepts a fundamental theoretical issue—namely, that it is impossible to study consciousness by eliminating the subject of consciousness itself, asserting that one's subjectivity invalidates the inquiry into consciousness. Removing subjectivity from the investigation of consciousness implies eliminating what matters most about consciousness itself. Thus, subjectivity is at the heart of this inquiry, proposing a veritable hermeneutics of contemplative experience. This study also distinguishes subjectivity, understood as an experience of which the individual is the immediate witness, and identity, a psychosocial construct that constitutes bonds of belonging and imaginative association of a part of the individual with a specific set of elements with which it forms a privileged association.

A fundamental aspect of this phase of ethnographic inquiry is the incorporation of autoethnography as a valid tool for participation in the ethnographic experience. Several studies have already highlighted the efficacy and validity of autoethnography for anthropological inquiries.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, as discussed in previous works that yielded significant outcomes in this

research, the articulation of an anthropological study of meditation inevitably leads to a reevaluation of ethnographic theory in its entirety.<sup>2</sup> First and foremost, the absence of a well-defined geographic or cultural field prevents the anthropologist from having the traditional backdrop for their research. When the ethnographic field becomes consciousness, specifically the consciousness of a subject initially perceived as other, a way must be found to establish a connection that goes beyond adapting to the customs of a particular standardized cultural form. Often, the subjects even come from the Western cultural world, and it is meditation that has been enculturated, assimilated, adapted, transculturated, and transformed to suit the needs of the Western world. This implies the need to develop a critical awareness of the history of meditative practice, but the contemplative experience itself is not always compromised by the transformation of the practice or the beliefs that lead individuals to adopt it. This seems to be indicated by a common tendency to report very similar experiences, especially in what we can refer to as the *deep phase* of the contemplative-meditative process. Autoethnography contributes to participation in this phenomenon. Furthermore, an anthropologist studying meditation cannot claim to do so from an external perspective, that is, as a non-meditator. This would place them entirely outside the possibility of understanding analogous experiences, constituting an objectivist claim that is inapplicable to meditation, as if it were a phenomenon to be studied *in vitro*, forcing an entirely unnatural detachment from anthropological intentions. Autoethnography, therefore, takes into account the experiences of the anthropologist and, *mutatis mutandis*, integrates them among the experiences of other subjects participating in this field of consciousness.

The need that has driven me to challenge ethnographic theory stems precisely from this assumption: the practice of meditation requires a drastic reconsideration of the role of subjectivity, both of the anthropologist and the anthropologized. Notwithstanding the phenomenological turn and the recognition of subjectivity as an essential qualitative aspect within anthropological inquiry, ethnography continues to pose theoretical challenges necessitating resolution, particularly concerning the nuances of subjectivity itself and the anthropologist's capacity to grasp fully the alterity inherent in the other under examination. This observation arises from my ethnographic exploration of meditation and highlights the inherent challenge in investigating consciousness while utilizing theoretical frameworks that impose certain constraints.

Initially, anthropologists claimed to study cultural phenomena quantitatively, distancing themselves from the experiences of who they studied and placing themselves above them by treating the investigated populations as laboratory animals. It was argued that subjective intervention would invalidate the study, and any personal interpretation could not compromise what should be a cold presentation of empirical data. Fortunately, researchers later realized that this method completely hindered the understanding of complex human phenomena, whether cultural, social, or religious. Subjectivity—along with the beginnings of philosophical reflection—has, therefore, forcefully reentered anthropological inquiry.

While subjectivity is recognized as an intrinsic element of anthropological inquiry, there persists a notion that grasping the subjectivity of others remains elusive. Despite anthropologists themselves maintaining subjective viewpoints, the idea of completely relinquishing one's cultural identity to authentically adopt the perspective of another culture or personal life experience is considered somehow unattainable. This imposes a theoretical constraint on the ethnographic

approach, which fails to fully address the original issue of the colonial separation between the anthropologist (regarded as culturally superior) and the Indigenous other (deemed inferior).

Even after the phenomenological turn, the paradigm of self/other remains intact: it is simply acknowledged that, while the anthropologist can never fully understand the inner dimensions of another subjectivity, they must still approach this impossibility through the lens of what they can offer via the mediation of their own subjectivity. This is only partially solved by establishing a relationship of mutual exchange: the anthropologist anthropologizes the Indigenous but the Indigenous also does the same with the anthropologist, creating a circle of intersubjective exchange where every shared experience is filtered through one's own subjectivity and then reflected.

When, however, one delves into the analysis of contemplative practice, what happens, at least in my case, is rather peculiar in this regard. The paradigm in question, which is effectively a dualistic paradigm or a form of weak dualism (self/other), is completely overturned. As an anthropologist, I could not help but report that my subjective experience, following prolonged meditation practice, no longer conceived my subjectivity as separate from that of others. It is inevitable, while practicing meditation, to gradually abandon the conception of a division among subjects (including ourselves). This is not simply in a conceptual manner; this is an experience completely felt by the meditator, who is progressively able to expand or even project what before was perceived as one's own consciousness into forms and modes of perception normally impossible to realize. As noted by Claire Petitmengin,

This “subtilization” of the subject–object couple may occur gradually as meditative practice progresses. As more and more subtle tensions loosen, the emergence of the phenomenon and its resorption become closer and closer, until becoming simultaneous. First comparable to a drawing engraved in stone, the world of appearances becomes similar to a drawing made by a stick in the water, then finally to a drawing made by a stick in the air.<sup>3</sup>

Specifically, I never lost the value of subjectivity as the point of observation from which my experience emanated. What is lost through meditation is separative identity: the idea that my experience is somehow owned by or belonging to the point of view experiencing it. This phenomenon was also observed in meditators participating in the study and was a fact that could not be ignored. How do we then account for intersubjective exchange regarding a contemplative experience that transcends the dialogue between two separate subjectivities and transforms it into the oscillation of subjectivity from one point to another? How do we, as anthropologists, account for the fact that the meditating subject no longer perceives a candle, for example, as a separate object but may even feel as though they are the candle itself? It is important to note that this phenomenon is not mere embodiment: the perspective of the observed is not assumed by the observer but is actually exchanged with the observer to the extent that the meditator can feel transcendence of their own point of view to see themselves from the outside or truly perceive the experience as if it belongs to what they would have previously defined as something other than themselves. This phenomenon belongs to a total transformation of the field into a nonlocal experience of subjectivity. Meditation leads to a form of extended consciousness similar to that of

altered consciousness accompanying the use of psychoactive substances.<sup>4</sup> The difference is that, in extended consciousness phenomena, extension is fully under the control of the subject's will, allowing them to voluntarily relinquish their point of observation and assume an omnidirectional one.

At this juncture of the analysis, two pivotal issues emerge. The first necessitates a comprehensive redefinition of the theoretical framework and ethnographic methodologies: it is imperative to discard the dogma that suggests anthropologists are incapable of fully comprehending the subjectivity of the other. While it may be presumptuous to aspire to completely internalize someone else, the question arises: how does one navigate a scenario where the other is no longer discerned as such, to the extent that the researcher's own identity becomes conflated with that of the subjects studied or to the point that there is no more identity or psychocultural separation creating two distinct identities? Second, a methodology needs to be found that could better account for this experience of self-transcendence. In the first case, the response I propose is precisely that of Contemplative Anthropology. Inspired on one hand by contemplative ethnography proposed by Orellana and on the other by micro-phenomenological inquiry, I have begun to articulate a nondualistic anthropological theory.<sup>5</sup> The outcomes of this articulation belong to other studies, so I will not repeat what has been said in those publications.<sup>6</sup>

Regarding methodology, my intention in this article is to explore one of the possible approaches to ethnographic-contemplative investigation that can yield insights into the study of meditation practice. This is just one of many possible methodologies, so I urge the reader not to view this proposal as a rigid articulation of a new method, but rather to consider the results I will partially present in this study as the outcome of a possible new form of inquiry. The methodology I have developed is not solely based on ethnographic experience but also on the study of other methodologies. In particular, Gary Moody's work utilizes visual devices in anthropological contexts. While developing this methodology, I delved into other ethnographies that integrated contemplative practices and image production, albeit not strictly related to meditation. This aspect is analyzed in section 4, where I intend to provide the reader with a brief background of a portion of the research that runs parallel to my ethnography. I also aim to clarify the connection between image and contemplative practice: how the latter has always utilized the imaginal medium as an aid to meditative exercise, which prompts me to reflect on another type of image evocation in precisely the forms of elicitation that I will present.

## **2. A VISUAL METHODOLOGY FOR ETHNO-CONTEMPLATIVE INQUIRY**

The exploration of human consciousness has emerged as a central focal point across multiple academic disciplines, including Psychology, Anthropology, and the newborn field of Contemplative Studies. Meditation has garnered sustained interest among researchers seeking to comprehensively fathom its profound impact on both mental and physical wellbeing. However, investigating the inherently subjective experiences of individuals engaged in meditation has proven to be a formidable challenge, owing to the private and elusive nature of contemplation. Through the active involvement of participants in crafting multistage mandalas during their

meditation sessions, and subsequently dissecting and interpreting these artistic expressions, I aspired to attain more profound insights into the multifaceted world of meditative experiences.

When I initially ventured into structuring an inquiry into the various states of consciousness inherent in meditation through the medium of visual imagery, I turned to visual elicitation: a technique that necessitates the active engagement of subjects in either the production or interpretation of images.<sup>7</sup> The employment of this technique is particularly advantageous for several reasons. First and foremost, it relieves the subjects of the potential discomfort of verbally articulating such intricate experiences. By utilizing images as an intermediary, this technique simplifies the process and empowers the subjects to assume the role of knowledge dispensers themselves—thereby removing the anthropologist from the position of expert and stripping away the associated authority typically wielded in scholarly interactions that may influence the spontaneity of the responses of the subjects. Specifically, I opted to request subjects to instinctively produce images while also emphasizing that this image creation should unfold in a sequential, layered manner. The decision to construct the mandala in a modular fashion, with each layer corresponding to a distinct meditation session, was deliberate. I observed that this approach enabled individuals to recognize within the complete image the various stages of a complex meditative journey. By proposing a path that spanned several days of hypothetical meditation sessions, I found it essential to preserve a record of the meditative journey itself. This could be achieved through two distinct approaches: either by requesting the production of an image at the conclusion of each meditation session or by asking for the creation of a single, complex image in multiple phases. The latter approach allowed the compositional elements of the visual data to emerge progressively, influenced by and reflective of the contemplative journey's evolution. Remarkably, in both my autoethnographic exploration and the experiments conducted with other subjects, there was a notable tendency to generate mandala-like images from the outset.

For clarification, the term *mandala* denotes composite circular images characterized by stratified levels, either circular or bounded by other geometric shapes that are visually distinct from their respective contents. In the case of paintings, two-dimensional mandalas are to be considered schematic representations of three-dimensional cosmograms, spherical representations of the universe.<sup>8</sup> The historical analysis of mandala figures and their significance in Buddhist visual culture as well as their extensive application within Analytical Psychology, notably introduced by Jung, represent two important dimensions of this phenomenon.<sup>9</sup> A comprehensive exploration of these aspects, however, is beyond the scope of this article. With the recognition that the excessively analytical approach often sought by Psychology may not be well suited to anthropological objectives, I opted to devise my own method inspired by Jungian experiences but fundamentally grounded in ethnographic and autoethnographic practices, visual elicitation techniques, and micro-phenomenological theory. The outcomes of this investigation lay the foundation for arguments pertaining to the necessity of the aforementioned Contemplative Anthropology.

I invited meditation practitioners to portray their spontaneous thoughts, emotions, and experiences, as well as the residual from the exercise of emptying the mind and the progressive extinguishment of the cognitive mechanisms that meditation involves without predefined meanings or artistic constraints, thereby employing the mandala as a conduit for visual elicitation. The creation of multilayered mandalas during diverse phases of meditation serves as a distinctive

window into the evolving states of consciousness that occur during contemplative practice. The research methodology employed in this study is predicated on three fundamental principles.

The first is that participants must be interested in practicing meditation, irrespective of their level of expertise or specific technique. This study recognizes the essential elements of meditation, including concentration, the cessation of automatic cognitive processes, and the exploration of deeper layers of consciousness, as constitutive of the contemplative experience.

Second, concerning the visual production, participants are encouraged to craft multistage mandalas during their meditation sessions, each stage representing their evolving states of mind and experiences. Participants enjoy creative freedom in selecting the shape and progression of their mandalas, enabling spontaneous and unencumbered artistic expression.

And finally, the third imperative applies to interpretation. Following the creation of the mandala, participants present their work to an anthropologist to whom they expose their interpretation of the drawings. This process empowers participants to assume the role of experts of their own visual creations, fostering open and candid dialogue concerning their meditative encounters. Initially, the anthropologist functions primarily as a listener, employing questions to delve into intriguing facets of the artwork. In certain instances, the anthropologist may propose interpretive hypotheses, thereby encouraging participants to contribute their insights.

The anthropologist's involvement in ethnographic interviews is inspired in part by micro-phenomenological investigation and focuses particularly on the subjective experience of meditators, and solicits an interpretation of the images they have spontaneously produced that should not be tainted by too much formal or experiential preconceptions. The image must emerge and appear in the drawing practice without the subject conceiving it as associated with forms that one already has in mind.

Certainly, one must be aware of the difficulty of such an exercise, yet the attempt to avoid associating forms of designation with the images produced also serves to diminish, through contemplative exercise, the judgmental thinking that typically dominates the human mind as a form of automatism. The choice to refrain from a priori interpretations and to adopt only retrospective readings of the complete image is inspired, on one hand, by the micro-phenomenological exercise, which as we will later observe draws heavily from the contemplative experience. On the other hand, it is inspired by the nonjudgmental attitude that is also a necessary condition to liberate the image from the impossibility of conveying a spontaneous message. Naturally, it is seemingly impossible to produce any visual or semantic content devoid of meaning—but the intention of this research is not to achieve some form of absolute and fundamental purity of the conscious process. Our understanding of consciousness (*viññāṇa*) is not so much that of a data processor of the world, but rather as an entity that, only and solely when placed in relation to the world (*loka*), generates designations (*paññatti*).<sup>10</sup> Therefore, it is this process of designation that interests us in coming to better comprehend, through investigating these images, how contemplation can assist in establishing a dialectic between subject and world, and thus, how consciousness can somehow also be that which is mainly responsible for the dualistic mechanisms that contemplative practice seeks to transcend. The image produced through contemplative exercise will almost certainly reflect, if meditation is well performed, those phases of the progressive weakening of designation processes that attribute conventional meanings to the



world. This process will appear in the symbolic forms that the subject's perception tends to unconsciously attribute to the forms that gradually deconstruct within its conscious apparatus.

Contemplative exercise helps us understand consciousness insofar as consciousness is placed in relation to something and studied in its being-placed-in-relation (*Bewusstsein ist immer Bewusstsein von etwas*, in Husserl's terms).<sup>11</sup> Otherwise, consciousness in itself, just as the world in itself, would have no meaning. On the other hand, as we will see toward the end of this article, such an understanding of the conscious medium further helps us understand why Buddhists, in describing the experiences of deeper states of consciousness reached through contemplative practice, spoke of a fundamental and indivisible unity between the observing subject and the observed object.<sup>12</sup> The relationship established between the meditator in this study and the images taking shape during their contemplative exercise speaks to us, in turn, of a conscious relationship structured through the image. It also reveals the irreducibility of the actors involved, portraying them not as mere separate interactors but rather as two epiphenomena of a more complex unity in which the observer looking at the image is simultaneously being observed by this image—but in such a way without this shared vision being a relationship of division.

Only in a subsequent phase, following the stages of drawing and progressive mandalic layering, is the meditator asked to observe the visual product in its entirety and interpret it, or to contemplate the completed image and articulate their reflections and thoughts concerning it. This is naturally only possible following a well-performed contemplative practice, which leads to a nonjudgmental concentration and an emptying of the mind from the proliferation of uncontrolled cognitive images, as demonstrated in the case of mental films in the circumstances of a weakened concentration.<sup>13</sup> This assertion is further corroborated by Petitmengin's observations, wherein she addresses the challenges associated with attaining a state of proficient focused attention and accessing pre-reflective consciousness:

The meditator also discovers, accompanying this nearly uninterrupted murmur, a swift flow of inner images and "films": memories both recent and remote, pleasant or unpleasant, desired or apprehended future scenes, of which only a small portion emerges into consciousness. These imaginary discourses and inner imagery contribute to maintaining an almost incessant flux of emotions, of which only the most intense images are ordinarily perceived. However, these discursive, imaginary, and emotional layers obscure an even more difficult-to-access, subtler dimension.<sup>14</sup>

To enrich the depth of this study, I also engaged in autoethnographic practice, generating mandalas during multiple meditation sessions. Subsequently, these mandalas were shared with other participants, and a cross-reading of their works ensued, augmenting the interpretations and insights derived from the study. This research methodology bridges the divide between subjective experiences and scholarly inquiry, offering a transdisciplinary approach rooted in contemplative practice, ethnography, and visual elicitation. The examination of multilayered mandalas as reflections of meditative journeys equips researchers with invaluable insights into the intricacies of human consciousness, thereby advancing our comprehension of the human psyche and its interplay with meditation. This approach not only rejuvenates Jung's pioneering experiments but

also sets the stage for future investigations exploring the dynamic interrelationship between art, spirituality, and self-exploration within the realm of meditation.

### 3. VISUAL ELICITATION OF A CONSCIOUS EXPERIENCE

For reasons of spatial constraints, and given that the outcomes of this research will be presented in other works, this article will provide only a few examples of mandalas that have been created for this study, introducing the ethnographic subjects who have participated in them or who have made a significant contribution to the study. Leo has been the most prolific in terms of drawings, which is remarkable considering that he is also a novice in meditation. While pursuing his undergraduate degree in physics during the research, and aspiring to become a mathematician, he agreed to participate in the study because he was fascinated by contemplative practice and thus provided an important example of an initial foray into meditation. His contemplative exercise flowed naturally into his drawings, and he produced numerous finished mandalas that have been collected and analyzed in the forthcoming outcomes of this study.

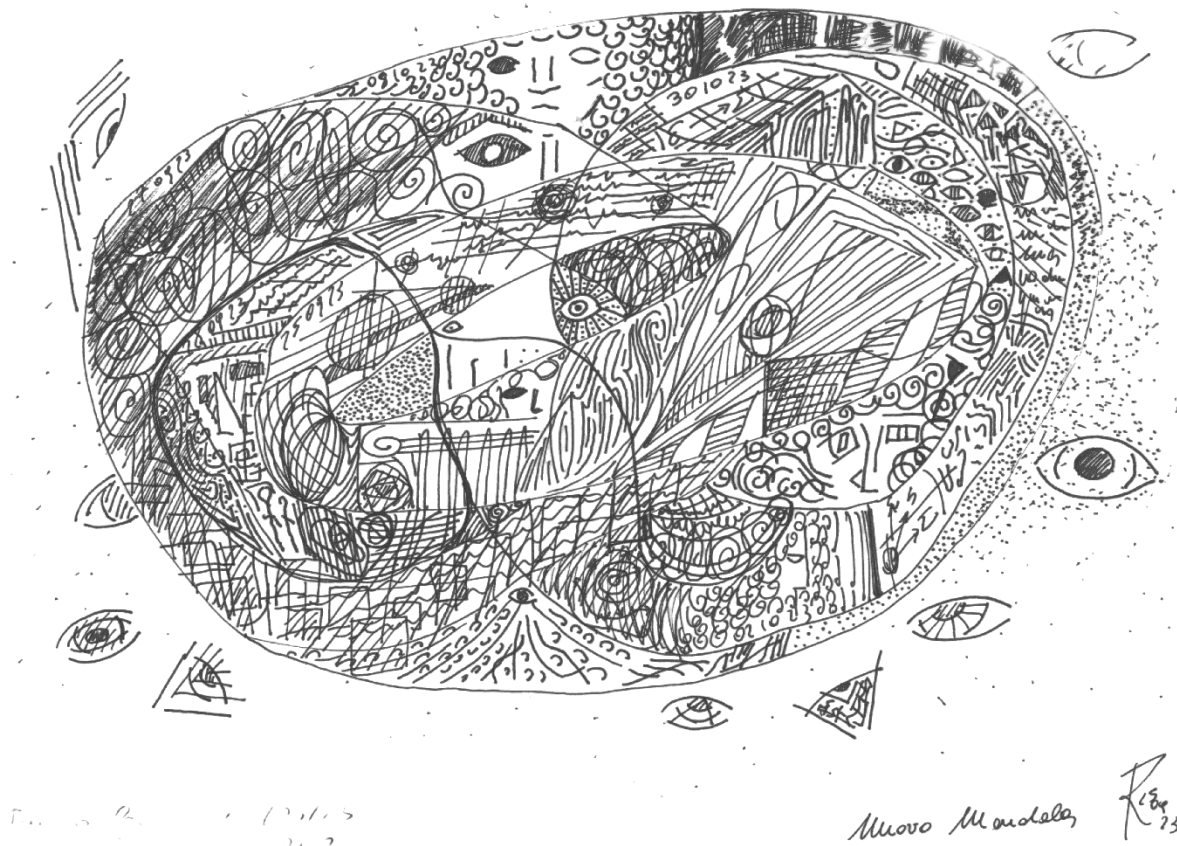


Figure 2. Mandala realized September 25–October 8, 2023, courtesy of Leo Caliandro

However, there are also some initial experiments that were created prior to the implementation of the primary exercise I have outlined in the preceding paragraphs. Within these prior experiments, the initial drawings were generated as part of two five-day meditation sessions,

producing ten preliminary mandalas in total, which represent five different stages of meditation within each session. Subsequently, for the purpose of systematically presenting the results of a unique mandala that consolidates a multistage meditative process into a single design, this research will also showcase one of the mandalas created by Leo using this technique. This particular technique is the one that I decided to pursue for all the other ethnographies, and it has been analyzed in various ethnographic studies currently in the process of being published. Following this outcome, the decision was made to shift toward producing only one drawing for more intense meditation sessions, and since the mandalic form had been invoked, the aim was to define the meditative phases through the progressive layering of the drawing, as shown in figure 2. This is the final outcome of an ongoing stage of this specific mandala layering. The complete stages of this mandala will be presented exclusively in this study and will be analyzed at the end of the article (see fig. 13).

Leo, like the majority of participants, chose to layer from the outside to the inside, leaving the core for last. Some other meditators preferred to outline the core first or even opt for a multifocal concept of layer, creating apparent overlapping shapes. In Leo's case, the cores reached the end of the meditation session as the culmination of the practice, thus reflecting the deepest contemplative moment. The initial experiments are presented in figures 3–8 to analyze the evolutionary aspect of this ethnography and how it transformed to adapt to the requirements of what the visual data gradually revealed.

Finally, in the previous discussion of methodology, I chose to include one of the mandalas that I personally created (fig. 1). I have produced several mandalas throughout the course of my autoethnographic research, and many of them have been subject to the considerations of other study participants, where I would not always specify the authorship. Their interpretations have shed light on significant aspects of the dynamics of imaginal and pre-reflective experiences. By the term *pre-reflective*, I am referring to what Petitmengin explicates as “the portion of our experience that is lived without being acknowledged, devoid of immediate accessibility to consciousness and verbal description.”<sup>15</sup>

The experiences of these initial mandalic experiments are represented by Leo through notes that were written after the drawings. His experiences are characterized primarily by their involvement in the sphere of expanding sensory perceptions, a common aspect for those who begin meditating consistently. Leo wrote about these preliminary experiences: “Movement flows into form, I sense a mechanical art, devoid of constitution. It must be a persistent revelation, intention.” This initial reflection, concerning the very first meditation (fig. 3), focuses on the mere experienced phenomenon, movement, that projects itself into form and its visual representation. Leo experienced a progressive immersion in the immediacy of the phenomenon, whether it be movement or thought. Furthermore, as he concluded the second meditation, he made an exceptionally singular declaration: “Outside of me, the world does not touch me, I myself seem not to touch me, nothing is familiar to me” (fig. 4). Here, we already witness the beginning of a loss of centrality of the psychophysical aggregate: Leo's apparent disorientation from mundanity is perfectly understandable in the eyes of a Buddhist, and in Leo's case, it moves from the disavowal of worldly things that were once familiar to him to turning against his own psychological self in alienation.

We were still in the preliminary stages of this research with images and had not yet chosen the mandala as the experimental form to ask of meditators, but Leo encouraged the development of these imaginal and somewhat poetic considerations around a central nucleus. The third day he continued: “the expression of creativity,” referring to what he produced with the third meditation, “which ends where I cannot stop. Happiness” (fig. 5). This meditation accompanied the unlocking of a similar euphoric state that would return later in Leo’s meditative experience and beyond. However, euphoria was followed by a rapid decline. With the next meditation, Leo expressed “anger . . . I don’t understand why they don’t understand. Tension” (fig. 6). This is a very peculiar phase of his meditative journey. Detachment from the worldly sphere is experienced on the threshold of a crisis of presence, a particular phase I have studied in a separate context.<sup>16</sup>

Finally (fig. 7), a sense of suspension remains, which on one hand fascinated Leo to the point of wanting to take meditation more seriously—he eventually became the main contributor to this study—and on the other hand, leaves us with many questions. This was only an initial phase, followed by more drawings and a meditative experience even more complex and focused on consciousness. However, it is essential to understand the beginnings of this research, which are also partly reflected in the sense of Leo’s last of the preliminary meditations, which reported: “waiting. Time is stagnant. Everything is slow, confused. Narcolepsy. Monotony melds perception.”

From figure 7 to figure 8, we visually observe the transition from one meditative session to another. The elapsed time between consecutive sessions is approximately five days. As previously mentioned, we were still in the initial stages of the experiment, and our original intention was to create distinct drawings for each meditation session, contextualizing them within specific sessions. However, upon noticing that the drawings were all conspicuously taking on a mandala-like form, I began to entertain the idea of proposing the creation of a single composite drawing, where multiple phases of a single meditative session would be layered, akin to how different layers of a mandala represent distinct sections of the artwork. This was made feasible in part due to the presence of these mini-mandalas in the initial stages. As we shall see in the presentation of the complete mandala (fig. 2) selected for this article, which is but one among the many created by Leo, the stylistic variance is not significant. Rather, the resulting image becomes more intricate due to the accumulation of meditative experiences over time, which are artistically rendered into a unified form that is simultaneously multifaceted and capable of representing various degrees of abstraction.

Leo’s embryonic meditative experiences proffer a trove of invaluable insights pertaining to the incipient phases of his sojourn toward heightened consciousness. These experiential vignettes, inextricably interwoven with his participation in mandalic experiments, furnish a foundational substratum for further elucidation and inquiry into the intricate dynamics that meditative practices, consciousness, and the micro-phenomenological substratum thereof entail. As Leo’s contemplative voyage evolves, this inceptive phase emerges as a pivotal referential vantage point for comprehending the transformative potential of meditation upon an individual’s subjectively construed experiential tapestry.

As elucidated by Petitmengin, the complexities inherent in comprehending our subjective experiences are multifaceted.<sup>17</sup> Foremost among these complexities is the arduous task of cultivating and sustaining a stable focus of attention. This challenge becomes conspicuously

manifest when we endeavor to direct our attention toward diverse stimuli, whether they take the form of inner mental images (e.g., envisioning an apple, a tulip, or an elephant) or external objects (such as a pen or a paperweight).

Remarkably, within an exceedingly brief temporal window, typically lasting no more than a few seconds, our cognitive processes are prone to intrusion. These intrusive cognitions may assume various forms, including the resurgence of memories linked to the initial mental image or object, spontaneous commentaries pertaining to the ongoing experiential context, or the emergence of entirely unrelated streams of thought. This idea of art as a “liberation of sense” through the image is mentioned also by Santiago and Kiefer in the form of *ut pictura poesis*, that is to say, “a picture is a silent poem and a poem is a picture that speaks.”<sup>18</sup>

Let us now briefly analyze what Leo interpreted about the second session (figs. 7–12). At the onset of this session, Leo attested to having undergone a transformation in his perceptions of temporality and spatiality. Specifically, with regard to figure 7, he stated, “There is a reason for time . . . a visible and arcane rationale of things . . . there is a space.” He proceeded with his meditations, developing considerable cognitive flexibility, although it is imperative to note that his academic background is in physics and mathematics. Many of his conceptions began to intersect with his meditative experiences, altering his perspective on reality: “Asymmetry . . . I have perceived an oddity in reality . . . a point of deviation from order . . . imperceptible asymmetry” (fig. 8). This notion of asymmetry is a highly intriguing theme, which I have also observed in other meditators. They tend to describe the sense of peace at the zenith of meditation as a moment when all the elements of the world harmonize with each other, reaching a point of equilibrium where they dissolve. Only by virtue of fundamental asymmetry, a crack in things, does the universe reveal itself, and meditation is aimed at rectifying this distortion. Leo appeared to corroborate this experience in the subsequent phase: “Balance . . . a new path is required . . . essences blur. Alienation” (fig. 9). Already in this phase, the potential for deconstruction of perceptual data, inherent to meditation, bears fruit as does the approach to a state of tranquility resulting from glimpsing beyond these cognitive deceptions to a potential harmony or, at the very least, an acceptance of the essence of reality.

However, at this point we are still in the preliminary stages of the experiment, and meditation is by no means an easy exercise. In figure 10, Leo indeed reported “fatigue,” and continues, “Space becomes distant and empty . . . precarious . . . time stretches . . . the hand is sluggish,” and finally (fig. 11): “Anxiety . . . monotony of thought . . . a weight on the stomach.”

Compounding this cognitive challenge is the propensity of these intervening thoughts to engross our mental faculties to such an extent that a considerable duration of time may transpire, at times extending to several minutes, before we become conscious of the wandering trajectory of our attention. It is only at the point of this realization, assuming it transpires, that we recognize that throughout the entire duration we have remained oblivious to the fact that our cognitive focus had veered away from its original locus, effectively rendering us in a state of cognitive drift.

Furthermore, in the context of tasks necessitating sustained attention, such as the act of writing, this inclination to drift from the primary task often rears its head. It is not uncommon to find oneself succumbing to these bouts of cognitive drifting, while only subsequently discerning that the cognitive processes had been engrossed in an entirely distinct mental endeavor detached from the immediate task at hand. In certain instances, the resumption of the primary task may occur without

the realization that a momentary distraction had transpired. Consequently, there exists a profound lack of conscious recognition at any juncture that our attention has veered away from its intended focal point.

This fact underscores not only the formidable nature of the challenge associated with maintaining cognitive focus but also the pervasive unawareness that characterizes this challenge. To attain awareness of the intrinsically volatile nature of our attentional processes, the creation of specific conducive conditions or the provision of specialized training aimed at cultivating our capacity to discern and acknowledge this phenomenon is necessary.

Petitmengin explicitly advocates the utilization of Buddhist contemplative practices as a means to surmount the challenges associated with a comprehensive understanding of one's own subjective experience.<sup>19</sup> She contends that through rigorous training, exemplified by the practice of *samatha-vipassana* meditation, individuals can autonomously delve into the multifaceted dimensions inherent to their subjective realms. Over a span of several months, these dedicated practitioners progressively unveil, and often express astonishment at, the intricate strata comprising the fabric of their internal landscapes.

In the initial phases of this exploration, individuals may find themselves overwhelmed by the sheer scope of their inner discourses, resembling what Plato in *The Sophist* characterizes as thought itself—a silent dialogue of the soul with itself. Concurrently with this near-constant internal dialogue, a rapid stream of inner imagery and mental cinematics emerge, either drawn from recollection or spontaneously constructed in real time. This mental imagery encompasses a wide spectrum, covering both recent and distant memories and evoking a spectrum of sensations, from delight to the resurgence of traumatic recollections. Moreover, these mental representations often project forthcoming scenarios characterized by either anxiety-laden apprehension or the hues of desire unfolding ceaselessly. This rich tapestry of mental imagery is typically intertwined with emotions of varying intensity, thereby further enriching the contours of the subjective experience. It is important to underscore that beneath these discernible layers lies a more enigmatic and subdued dimension, wherein the demarcations between self and others, the inner and outer domains, and diverse sensory modalities become increasingly indistinct, as elaborated upon in Petitmengin's earlier works.

Furthermore, in conjunction with these manifold strata of experience, practitioners gradually attune themselves to the dynamic facet of their inner world. This dynamic dimension encompasses the swift succession of cognitive operations, including comparisons, evaluations, and diagnostic assessments. All this together collectively constitutes the ceaseless current of practitioners' subjective experiences.

Our objective is to deconstruct the conventional theoretical underpinnings of the world's perceived image that is predicated upon a conventional internal/external binary, advocating for an alternative, nondualistic theory of visual perception. This nondualistic approach transcends the conventional stereoscopic ontological framework hypothesized in favor of a holographic model wherein cognitive systems actively shape reality through a constellation of images emergent from an omnipresent semantic substrate.<sup>20</sup> This novel theoretical framework, inspired by the reinterpretation of nondualistic conceptions found in Buddhist traditions, propounds a transformative trajectory transcending the current phenomenological-anthropological paradigm. This can be achieved also by the more extensive utilization of contemplative practice. In her work

on the pre-reflective consciousness, Petitmengin reflects on meditation and concludes that “the analysis of the descriptions we have gathered suggests that during the process of gaining awareness, as attention relaxes its focus on external objects to engage with the so-called ‘inner’ experience, the distinction between ‘inner’ and ‘outer,’ self and non-self, diminishes.”<sup>21</sup>

#### 4. PREVIOUS USES OF DRAWING IN THE CONTEMPLATIVE FIELD

The aspect of visual elicitation is notably absent from the methodological approach employed by psychologists. When requesting the creation of a mandala, psychologists anticipate encountering general elements that can be attributed to a preconceived schema or a series of predetermined structures from which they can draw the interpretations they seek. Elicitation, however, implies consideration of the possibility that certain content, even the image itself, may not be mere representations but rather impressions of specific psychic moments. These impressions are summoned into existence and are not entirely formed or shaped solely by the will of the drawer. According to Petitmengin,

Under a non-dualist/non-representationalist assumption, what is expected from introspection is definitely not to monitor the “inner” realm in the same way as natural sciences monitor the “outer” realm. Instead, introspection here becomes just a historic name for a program of changing the focus of attention within the one and all-pervasive field of lived experience, from the narrowly focused state and coarse-grained categories needed by natural sciences to a broader range of interest and refined categories.<sup>22</sup>

In ethnographic interviews conducted with meditation practitioners, it becomes evident that by removing the element of mediation and requesting an uncritical drawing—one that is not the result of an effort to translate images into representations of something else but rather that which spontaneously emerges in the meditator’s consciousness after dissolving the dualistic structures of their conception through meditation—that such an image is perceived as something conscious in itself. It reflects, in some way, the consciousness of the one who summoned it into the visible realm in a visible form. There is an imaginative dialogue with what gradually appears on the paper, as if the artwork were not entirely produced but instead constitutes a fragment of consciousness summoned into existence through a dialogue with the meditator’s consciousness, arising from the contemplative practice itself.

For this reason, I consider Gary Moody’s anthropological work on shamanic drawing to be fundamental in gaining a deeper understanding of these experiences. Although Moody’s work does not concern mandalas or meditation directly, it is nonetheless significant because of how he employs the visual element to evoke forms associated with contemplative practices characterized by a form of spirituality that I would describe as akin to shamanism. In his specific case, the use of images serves as a healing technique through what he calls “Spiritualist mediumship,”<sup>23</sup> which bears strong resemblance to the shamanic journey and the involvement of spirits. In this context, the spirits inspire the images the artist invokes, thereby contributing to the healing process.

Moody refers to a cultural context in which these practices are intertwined with the communication with a spiritual realm. In my ethnography, I also encountered participants engaged in a personalized form of meditation, incorporating teachings on shamanic journeys. One of these

subjects considered the images that arose within mandalas during meditation as inspired by their spirit guides, encountered in a meditation regimen involving a series of mental imaging techniques associated with natural and chthonic environments. Therefore, it is not surprising to observe a connection between these collectively termed *shamanic* aspects, even in their modern reinterpretations and contemplative practice. Moody affirms that individuals can receive messages in the form of images from the spirit world through accessing an altered state of consciousness. The mastery of accessing these states is typically acquired from specific mentors and often through dialogue with spirit guides. Among the techniques that Moody himself acquired in this context, many evoke parallels with the preparatory sessions of Buddhist meditation: “breath-work, focusing on internal sensations in the body, relaxation, and guided visual imaginative meditations.”<sup>24</sup>

I have observed that Moody’s interpretation of “spirit” or the “spiritual world” can be considered comparable to that of “consciousness” within the context of my research. In this context, consciousness is intuitively understood by meditators as a subject that potentially permeates every aspect of life and takes on various forms that interact with one another. Therefore, in the case of my ethnography, mandalic forms were “inspired by consciousness” stimulated by contemplative practices, and they, in turn, were conscious aspects that manifested themselves through form much like how an individual’s consciousness manifests through their body. In Estelle’s study, a subject of Moody’s research, the “spirit art” can be said to be “created by spirit through a medium who is in a deep trance state.”<sup>25</sup>

The type of spiritual art that Moody refers to is known as “auragraph,” which is considered to convey information about the subject whose aura is represented through a form of imaginal impression. Moody embarked on his study of auragraphs following an encounter with a spiritual artist in 2020 that deeply impressed him. This artist demonstrated the ability to imprint an auragraph on Moody, revealing details of his life that she could not have known otherwise. Consequently, Moody decided to embrace the guidance of his spiritual guides to create auragraphs himself. His investigation sheds light on the limitations of traditional anthropological techniques, including participant observation and ethnographic interviews, as not fully capable of accounting for these spiritual experiences.<sup>26</sup> Moody implies that this limitation is rooted in the “Western scientific paradigm,” which refuses to acknowledge “the existence of spirits.”<sup>27</sup> In our case, however, a similar argument could be made regarding the expansive permeability of consciousness. Contemplative techniques, by weakening the psychosocial constructs that isolate subjectivity in the perception of being a separate identity (a self) from others, open up the possibility for individuals to understand their own consciousness as an epiphenomenon of a broader manifestation of reality. This broader manifestation also permeates other subjectivities and even images without distinct boundaries (to the extent that it allows the meditator to dialogue with images as if they were conscious). Such a claim is rather challenging to accept and at most evokes conceptions considered outdated by ethnology, such as hylozoism and animism, that lack the approval of the majority of Western scientists.

Here, there is also more than just a critic to the traditional ethnographic methods, since “using spirit art as a technique of the culture,” Moody writes, “I . . . increased my access and influence with participants. . . . I am using their language and beliefs.”<sup>28</sup> This idea reconnects us with what was previously discussed regarding the presumed impossibility, believed by many contemporary anthropologists, of fully embracing the subjectivity and experiences of others within one’s own



understanding. Participant observation nonetheless entails an inevitable form of detachment from what is being observed: the observer is in fact just that, an observer. As much as the observer may be a participant in the activities and cultural world under scrutiny, they will continue to perceive themselves as separate from it by virtue of their role as an observer. They may contemplate absorbing it, even dissecting it, but what we contemplative anthropologists propose is to become that very world, to abolish the barrier of separation that isolates the boundaries of one's subjective point of observation and elevates them to an identity. This is perhaps imputable also to a "psychological structure of modernity" that, according to Santiago and Kiefer, "is founded on hierarchical separation (of ideal and base, self and other, human and animal, white and black, man and woman, adult and child, sane and mad, civilized and savage)."<sup>29</sup> We are all effectively victims of these powerful forms of cognitive categorization and we cannot avoid critically considering these forms of conception of reality.

Regarding the understanding of these cultural realms, there is much to be discussed. It is evident that meditation is currently practiced within a context that carries particular conceptions about spirituality and life, which cannot be entirely overlooked. The decision to engage in contemplative practice can imply multiple reasons, some of which I have examined when addressing those who adopt meditation primarily as a therapeutic pathway. The same can be said for those who adopt it as a spiritual or consciousness-oriented journey. There are many analogies, even among the most disparate schools of thought, with a certain consensus about the world and life. To remain within the scope of Moody's work, I have observed a strong connection between the spirituality accompanying the meditative choice and the idea of shamanism or the channeling of certain spiritual or latent forces through contemplative practice. Historical reasons also account for this connection. Shamanism has had a significant impact on the Western world and has deeply fascinated it. Visual art has been profoundly influenced by shamanic conceptions that associate a close relationship between shamanism, understood as the earliest form of spirituality or proto-religion, and ancient art. Michael Tucker has identified the shaman as the prototype of all artists,<sup>30</sup> and although modern and contemporary popular conceptions regarding shamanism are heavily influenced by Western reinterpretations of this phenomenon and expectations toward exotic and ancient spiritualities, which are often attributed a certain degree of purity, it must be noted that some connections made by anthropologists and archaeologists between shamanic cults, sometimes considered an archaic form of spirituality, and the emergence of art may not be entirely fanciful. Despite the modern inclination, we should not entirely dismiss the possibility that this association between art and shamanism may be born partially of fantasy—but only insofar as this association tends to collectively identify as shamanism any form of ancient spirituality that involves pursuits such as altered or expanded consciousness, communication with an invisible spiritual world, the use of psychoactive substances, techniques to induce heightened states of consciousness, and the art stemming from these experiences.

In the context of India, it is possible to draw a connection between altered states of consciousness experienced by seers (*rṣi*), the authors of the Vedas, and the consumption of the *soma* beverage. The *soma* beverage is produced from a divinized plant, which some have identified as the *Amanita muscaria* mushroom.<sup>31</sup> If contemplative practice in Buddhism were, in some way, a result of replicating extended states of consciousness without the need for psychoactive substances, it would also be possible to establish a link between ancient art and the use of these

substances. This is because ancient art itself appears to document the consumption of psychedelic fungi in depictions that portray them surrounded by mystical auras or elements that suggest that these plants (though not ethnobotanically classifiable as such) held a specific role in those societies.<sup>32</sup> Analogously,

The way in which cave art was interpreted as shamanistic during the first half of the twentieth century reinforced the historically intertwined discursive constructs of art and shamanism, co-opting shamanism into the visual arts, highlighting cave art as the origin of art and shamanism the origin of religion. Alongside a belief in the psychic unity of mankind, this conveniently eroded the cultural and chronological specificity of art and shamanism and enabled the identification of avant-garde artists as the inheritors of a singular shamanistic art tradition.<sup>33</sup>

When we delve into the shamanic traditions of the Indian subcontinent, we come to realize how the image serves as a potent medium that not only constitutes the mere backdrop of what is experienced by the shaman during their flight, which is the contemplative practice in question, but also functions as the instrument of shamanic power. In other words, the image is not merely a visual metaphor used, for example, in therapeutic purposes, but also, in the sense of weakening the dualistic division of the ill person, advocating for the importance of a potential nondualistic experience in shamanic therapeutic practice. This also occurs within the Buddhist context of meditation but equally involves a contemplative-ecstatic practice that employs images for healing purposes. Much could be said about the healing power of images, regardless of their use in specific magical-ritual practices.<sup>34</sup>

As for Nepalese shamanism, which we take as an example here to provide a broader comparative perspective, images play a role in creating a genuine landscape. Robert Desjarlais is a cultural anthropologist who studied these traditions. He writes:

These geographical images serve as a symbolic matrix representing certain personal experiences of the patient. . . . Through the manipulation of images symbolic of personal experience, I argue, the shaman simultaneously transforms the patient's experience of selfhood. . . . In conducting such an exploratory surgery, searching for signs of the patient's situation, the shaman, and thus the patient, derive some knowledge from the images arising out of the healing geography. . . . He then re-presents this visionary knowledge to the patient through imagery, making explicit what was once implicit.<sup>35</sup>

In Buddhist contemplative practice, mental imaging exercises involve reflections on forms (*rūpa*) but also investigations into the essence of forms in colors and, more deeply, in light. For example, Majjhimanikaya 128 presents “specific mention of the need to see both light and visual forms in meditation.”<sup>36</sup> Important mental imaging exercises are also part of the Yogavacara tradition, a form of esoteric Buddhism that has long held the attention of scholars. This is a form of Buddhism that is perhaps reminiscent of archaic practices or at least those that predate the formation of movements such as Vajrayana or Yogacara. The Yogavacara tradition has been extensively studied by Kate Crosby, who has analyzed texts from this tradition within the context of the lineage of meditation practice in Theravada Buddhism. Crosby's recent study has

organically exposed the importance of mental imaging in these meditative practices structured as a true “inner alchemy,” or transformative process through imaging.<sup>37</sup>

A contemplative exercise that brings together the perception of light and colors with the exercise on body-scan meditation is found in the Cambodian text *The Lanka Path*, translated by Bizot.<sup>38</sup> Here the practice begins by reciting *arahaṃ* while breathing “until a white light appears.”<sup>39</sup> Even though this meditation makes use of images of light and symbolic colors associated with specific powerful syllables, we must keep in mind that any element of this exercise is identifiable as a *nimitta*:<sup>40</sup> “The mental object (*nimitta*) is first experienced at the tip of the nose, then moved initially to the heart and subsequently to the navel. . . . Subsequently, the various mental objects and elements are positioned at locations between the navel and the heart or in some kind of mandala-like arrangement at the center of the body.”<sup>41</sup>

## 5. CONTEMPLATIVE ANTHROPOLOGY AND AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

Regarding my autoethnography, as previously mentioned, I too embarked on a series of mandala drawing experiments. Autoethnography is a qualitative research method that combines autobiography and ethnography. Researchers study a culture or a specific human phenomenon through immersion as subjective participant observers using personal experiences as primary data. This method aims to provide insights into both personal experiences and broader social contexts.<sup>42</sup> For various reasons on which I will elaborate briefly in this section, autoethnography has proven to be the most valid method for investigating a complex experience such as meditation.

In the realm of quantitative research disciplines, subjective experience is frequently undervalued due to the belief that it represents perspectives that do not reflect an objective reality existing independently of the perceiver. Within the field of Anthropology, however, there has long been recognition of the subjective and qualitative value inherent in experiential data. This recognition has led anthropologists to turn their attention inward and value their subjective experiences as co-participants in multifaceted sociocultural dynamics. Autoethnography, as this approach is known, involves self-analysis of one’s involvement in field experiences. The anthropologist takes note of these experiences, considering the judgments that might influence their evaluation and acknowledging them as phenomena that could be studied. In my specific case, engaging in autoethnographic participation within this study involved precisely what was expected of other participants: meditating while keeping a record of my experiences during these exercises, noting every significant event in my experience, and gradually composing mandalic designs. I practiced doing so with an emptied mind, discerning when the meditative exercise concluded and when the emergence of ideas, automatic thoughts, judgments, and other mental constructs that typically act unconsciously and beyond our control interfered with my creative process. Naturally, as with all participants, this endeavor was not meant to be excessively strenuous, as the exercise itself required translating an experience of mindfulness into visible forms. As far as my interaction with other participants is concerned, it is indeed a highly relevant aspect for this kind of research. The dynamics between the anthropologist and the anthropologized constitute an integral part of both ethnography and autoethnography. These dynamics intertwine and introduce complexities in human relationships that contribute significantly, especially in a study of this nature, to the value of the generated data. Due to constraints of space, however, I am unable to delve into this specific aspect here, primarily because it is highly intricate and warrants a separate treatment. I will simply

state that the intersubjective relationship with the other meditators naturally implies the possibility for them to involve me in the interpretation of their drawings.

Throughout my experience, ethnography has always required a well-defined “field,” but when the field is consciousness itself and thus not a geographically accessible place, we must ask ourselves whether Anthropology can understand it or not. Certainly, we cannot ignore the fact that the studied subjects still have their histories, which are also made up of experiences that take place in specific locations. Wherever the meditator is, however, all cultural references falter, for this is precisely the purpose of meditation: to overcome the “cognitive habits” that are bestowed upon us by experience, education, language, family, and society—in a word, culture. Cultural Anthropology can go only so far: it can tell us about how a culture self-identified as “Western” accommodates individuals who, through processes of fascination and acquisition of phenomena perceived as other than their identity, appropriate a phenomenon (meditation) that is undoubtedly cultural as well, which itself consists of historical and philosophical legacies that collide and intersect. It can then tell us how this acquisition generates a transformation of the phenomenon—a transculturation—and how it, in turn, becomes part of logics of identity construction and representation involving belonging, spirituality, protest, or even conformity.

Then, when meditation is practiced for a certain period and in a certain manner, regardless of how the subject has come to know and appreciate meditation, certain cultural references are gradually lost, and the dilemma arises: How can the anthropologist define a blending of subjectivity, not solely between two subjects, but between a subject and an image? How can a meditating subject “feel” like a flower, a bee, a candle, or even infinite space? Herein lies the problem. My autoethnography began as an account of these experiences, even though I had meditated before embarking on this research.

However, this research led me to challenge certain assumptions of anthropological inquiry itself. My meditation practice precedes the period of this study, as I have been a meditator for many years. Meditation is a fundamental part of my life, which is why I decided to make it the focus of my academic research. From this perspective, what Moody says about involvement in the cultural dimension of what one studies (the spiritual world, in his case) is highly relevant, and I have personally experienced it in the major comprehension of meditative exercise. If one were to try to understand meditation simply through the experiences of others, without becoming a meditator oneself or even by disparaging meditation and claiming to be able to study it with objectivist detachment, one would not have any positive outcome.<sup>43</sup> Meditation is not simply a lifestyle and cannot be easily reduced to a specific sphere of religious beliefs, as Buddhism itself cannot be neatly categorized as a religion, spirituality, or philosophy. Buddhism can be considered as each of these things individually, yet it can neither be reduced to any one of them nor seen as the sum or combination of all three. However, Buddhist meditative practice cannot easily be relegated to religious practice like prayer; a spiritual practice; or even a psychological exercise (as believed by some mindfulness practitioners).

Nevertheless, it is important to consider that those who practice meditation certainly do so not only due to their particular spiritual inclinations or religious beliefs but also for psychological analysis purposes. Moving specifically to the drawings I produced (fig. 1), I will mention that they varied throughout this ethnographic practice. I will limit myself here to showing just one. My ethnographic practice had to fit within a specific timeframe, considering that my meditation was

already a habit for me as I had been meditating frequently, although not consistently, before starting this research. The meditation period I considered for this research was approximately one year, but the individual mandalas were created during single meditation sessions, which could vary greatly in duration. Some sessions lasted for months, others for weeks, and some for only a few days. Additionally, I experimented with various meditation practices beyond my usual habits.

Specifically, in the recent period, I decided to undertake a series of guided meditation sessions inspired by my experience in the Buddhist tradition, to which I added personal relaxation techniques, such as imagining myself descending deeper and deeper into the earth and focusing on a mental image such as a monochromatic luminous sphere. Part of these meditations are strongly inspired by what I said earlier about the *Lanka Path*. As I established myself within my designated meditation space, I gently closed my eyes, initiating a deliberate detachment from the external world. My respiration, characterized by its measured and consistent cadence, became the central focal point of my cognitive awareness. Within the framework of my inner sanctuary, which existed as an ostensibly timeless dimension, I commenced experiencing an intensely profound sense of tranquility and disengagement.

Continuing my meditative practice, I progressively traversed into more profound phases of meditative absorption. During this progression, the delineations of my personal identity began to blur, while my conscious awareness seemed to extend beyond the physical confines of my corporeal form. It was as though I was merging with the expansive cosmic undercurrent of existence, culminating in a state of profound unity and interconnection that transcended the conventional boundaries of perceptual consciousness.

Upon entering the culminating phase of my meditation, I arrived at a state characterized as *samadhi*, denoting the quintessential pinnacle of pure awareness. Within this state, all cogitations, desires, and attachments dissipated entirely. A distinct boundary between the observer and the observed ceased to exist, and my perception of individual identity disintegrated into the limitless expanse of consciousness. This was an experience that transcended time and spatial constructs, rendering all conventional notions of temporal and spatial demarcation empty, void.

This profound meditation, grounded in the teachings of the ancient Buddhist canon, facilitated an inward journey through the strata of my consciousness. It culminated in a state of profound serenity and an intimate sense of unity with the cosmos. This transformative encounter left me profoundly tranquil, fostering a renewed comprehension of the interconnectedness that pervades the fabric of all existence. From the perspective of my subjective experience, these meditations did not create significantly different reactions from the ones I was accustomed to. Therefore, I can consider the results of this initial experiment to be similar to those I had experienced in the past.

The process of mandala drawing was meant to be free from any pressure implicit in the idea of creating an artistic form, as the intention of this study was to use the visual medium to produce something of anthropological interest. It is not art itself that interests us, but the relationship with visual forms in the context of the study of consciousness. For this reason, I tried to rid myself of any preconceptions about artistic abilities and what should specifically be represented in a “proper” artistic manner. Instead, I focused on representing the shapes I experienced at the end of contemplative processes, concentrating on myself and the experience I had just gone through. This resulted in three different layers. I chose to use pens for this specific drawing and selected three different colors, because I felt they were essentially linked to the three experiential phases I had

gone through, each lasting about a week or slightly longer. However, it can be noticed that the colors are not distinctly distributed among the three layers. There is a predominant color for each layer with appearances of another color in the other layers. The central core, however, is entirely in green and was drawn as the final phase of meditation when the sensation was one of total liberation from defined forms of cognitive and subjective distinctions. At the peak of this meditation, after which I took a few days of rest as usual, I experienced a profound distortion of temporal and spatial perceptions.

While in the first phase of my meditation, the central experience involved an expanded sense of connection with the cosmos, especially with natural elements—which I felt compelled to represent in very rudimentary and elemental forms, such as rivers and trees. The last phase witnessed a complete upheaval of the simple extension of consciousness and a feeling of omnidirectional projection of my perception, as if I could simultaneously exist in various temporal and spatial points of what I seemingly experienced. This final, more difficult-to-describe phase was preceded by an intermediate period of euphoria-like experience that then drastically subsided. At the height of its exhilaration, I had the sensation of quickly understanding what was happening around me, even to the extent of believing I could predict events a few seconds in advance. I have confirmed that these phases reappear in various modalities, often in a different order, in other subjects involved in this study.

## 6. ANALYSIS: ONE CASE OF MANDALA-ELICITATION

We must cease now the autoethnographic considerations to return to the analysis of our subject, Leo. His productions are of particular interest to me because he was a novice in contemplative practice, having begun to engage in it precisely due to his interest in participating in this study. He has a scientific background and earned a degree in physics during this study, yet he is also interested in art, poetry, and literature. He is a multifaceted subject with artistic abilities that have always intrigued me, but prior to deciding to participate in this study, he had never shown interest in meditation or mandalas. The temporal leap between his final multilayered creation and those undertaken when he was still a novice meditator (figs. 3–12) spans nearly a year. A more detailed analysis of the results forms part of a research project that will have future outcomes distinct from the present paper. Thus, presenting the beginning and end of an annual journey seems the most concise means to encapsulate the outcomes of a year of meditation, which have yielded a considerable amount of ethnographic material and intriguing experiences for the field of Contemplative Studies.

Leo's final mandala (fig. 2) was created over six meditation sessions (visualized in fig. 13), each corresponding to distinct layers of stratification. In this phase, Leo developed a much deeper self-awareness as well as an understanding of the contemplative experience. Moreover, he encountered a phenomenon of great interest to me, which relates to the experience of the "end of the world," signifying states of anguish that some individuals confront when delving into the deeper phases of meditation. While these sensations are not universal among meditators, they are quite common and have been examined in a separate study.<sup>44</sup> I was surprised to identify them in Leo as well, but at this stage of experience, given the implications of these apocalyptic experiences, a similar outcome was to be expected.

In summary, these experiences of self-loss, often described by meditators as the “end of the world,” involve a sense of anguish stemming from the awareness of the loss of one’s psychological self. The term “end of the world” is borrowed from the anthropological studies of de Martino, an Italian historian of religions and anthropologist who conducted pioneering research in the field of ethnopsychiatry. His studies focused on themes such as cultural construction, social identity, and the relationship between religious cults, magical-ritual practices, and mythological narratives, in relation to psychopathologies specific to each culture (“culture-bound syndromes,” or CBS). He demonstrated how cases wherein the presuppositions for the emergence of sociocultural identity collapse—termed by him as “presence”—lead the subject to experience these moments as an apocalyptic “crisis.”<sup>45</sup> De Martino identifies these circumstances, often almost psychopathological (and therefore compared by him to the *Weltuntergangserlebnis*, i.e., the “delusion of world destruction”), in moments when the individual is overwhelmed by the world and cannot manage it. In the cases of meditators, however, the contemplative practice itself implies a voluntary deconstruction of the self, and thus the documented crisis experiences are among the most varied, ranging from being classified as “adverse events” to being recognized as transitional passages, anguishing yet peaceful crises that the meditator navigates and ultimately overcomes.<sup>46</sup> However, there still exists a degree of attachment in the meditator who fears the dissolution of their psychosocial identity and thus observes this meditation phase with a sense of impotent distress.

Leo describes the attainment of this very advanced stage of meditation as follows:

- Layer 1 (September 25): “The flowing attempt takes the form of a desire for stabilization, as if in search of a way to recognize itself, and a small portrait emerges, contrasting with the rigor of the individual presented forms . . . writing, science, geometric art.”
- Layer 2 (September 27): “It is entirely a portrait, the ego overflowing time and space, with hair entwined in the fabric of reality and illusion: the self is absolute, released in an attempt to surpass its natural boundaries.”
- Layer 3 (September 28): “There is a portrait of emptiness, of randomness without purpose . . . writing and the face return . . . again and again.”
- Layer 4 (September 30): “The dance of the observers takes the form of infinite gazes investigating . . . there is a futile attempt at a formal reproduction of speech . . . the observer . . . a portrait gaze . . . almost aged.”
- Layer 5 (October 2): “A profound sense of sadness that blends and spreads through existential loneliness . . . the complex is subjective but only . . . every representation of it is a form of this infinite solitude.”
- Layer 6 (October 8): “I feel extreme anxiety and restlessness, almost hyperventilating . . . every curl is the essence of closure, and together they close the subject . . . I have drawn anxiety and the unknown fate in different forms . . . I will never look at this mandala again, of which I am afraid.”

The delineation of Leo's six layers and phases of meditation provides an insightful lens through which anthropologists may examine the junctures between contemplative practice and anthropological inquiry. This association is not a recent confluence but, instead, finds its antecedents in earlier anthropological ruminations. Within this context, Leo's meditative experiences may be expounded upon as follows:

The inaugural phase in Leo's progression can be construed as commensurate with an anthropological odyssey, underscored by an emphasis on stability and recognition. This evokes parallels with Lévi-Strauss's notion of the ephemeral identity ("non existence d'une « identité substantielle »") in the many possible cultural worlds.<sup>47</sup> In this preliminary phase, Leo endeavors to comprehend and stabilize the configurations encountered during meditation, much akin to an anthropologist's quest to apprehend the fundamental constituents of a cultural phenomenon.

In the subsequent stage (phase 2), Leo's journey plunges to deeper depths as they confront a state wherein the ego transcends the confines of time and space, aspiring to traverse its innate boundaries. This comparative analysis finds resonance with Lévi-Strauss's concept of deconstructing the anthropologist's subject of scrutiny and mirrors the contemplative process of surpassing the boundaries of the self.

In the third phase of meditation, Leo delves into an imagery of emptiness, akin to the deconstruction of cognitive objects, which is a recurring theme in anthropological discourse. The cyclic reemergence of writing and facial representations hints at the perpetual deconstruction and reconfiguration of meaning, echoing the impermanence that is inherent in both meditative practice and anthropological investigation.

Moving on to phase 4, Leo's encounter exhibits an alignment with the anthropological gaze, where observers engage in investigative scrutiny and endeavor to replicate formality within the meditative realm. This parallels the anthropologist's diligent scrutiny and their aspiration to faithfully represent evolving cultural phenomena.

In phase 5, Leo confronts profound sorrow and existential solitude, which mirrors the distressing encounters that some meditators associate with the end-of-the-world sensation. This juncture prompts contemplation on the deconstruction of the experiential subject, akin to the imperative need for the exploration and deconstruction of anthropological subjectivity.

Finally, in phase 6, Leo grapples with extreme anxiety and a trepidation of confronting the unknown, a sentiment analogous to the apprehension often accompanying the transition to deeper meditative states: "I have drawn anxiety and the unknown fate in different forms . . . I will never look at this mandala again, of which I am afraid." This stage accentuates the significance of preparedness and the possession of a comprehensive interpretative framework, a facet underscored in anthropological research.

The anthropological perspective discerns parallelism between Leo's voyage in meditation and broader philosophical and ontological tenets rooted in the conception that entities and experiences are subject to perpetual transformation and transition. Just as Buddhism posits a physics of complexity, Anthropology, in like fashion, investigates the intricate interplay of elements within cultures and human experiences. Both domains disavow the notion that entities either emerge from or dissolve into nothingness, underscoring the interconnectedness and flux intrinsic to the human experience and its study. This shared philosophical foundation portends the potential for the



convergence of Anthropology and contemplative practice, thereby fostering a mutually enriching comprehension of human existence.

## 7. CONCLUDING REMARKS

In the current study, I analyzed a subset of data that was collected in a research project on the ethnography of consciousness in meditation. Specifically, these data represent a broad snapshot of the ethnographic experience, encompassing both preparatory forms—namely, the initial drawings produced by a subject during their personal meditation—and the final ones, when the meditative technique has entered a more mature phase. In this project, visual elicitation was employed as a tool to express the complex stages of contemplative practice, requiring subjects to draw at multiple stages during meditation sessions or to produce multiple drawings as their meditations progressed. As the subjects engaged in meditation over the course of days or months, consistently and on a daily basis, details were added to the drawings or, in the initial stages, different drawings were generated. In the concrete representation of images, the only request made by the researcher was to have no bias or preconceived plan. The subject was instructed to draw immediately after completing a meditation session and to put on paper whatever came to them in the most spontaneous and immediate manner possible without attempting to assign meaning a priori. Only subsequently, after the act of drawing was completed, could the subject reflect retrospectively on the images now before them, engaging in a dialogue between their own sensibilities and the image they had produced. This dialogue is what I, as an anthropologist, participated in, primarily adopting a receptive and listening mode and only marginally posing questions and reflections, allowing the subject to freely articulate and explain the meaning or emotions present in certain forms or structures within the image.

The data collection for these ethnographies was exclusively conducted through digital means.<sup>48</sup> This modality became extremely valuable during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, revealing how the digital means can contribute significantly to those situations in which the usual in-field ethnography is impossible.<sup>49</sup> In the case of the ethnography of meditation, as already mentioned, this becomes primarily indispensable for reasons that are intrinsic to the contemplative practice itself and make frequenting an ethnographic field, in a geographically determined sense, somewhat limiting. Naturally things change if one wants to investigate the cultural aspect of a specific tradition or movement around meditation, but if the focus is the subjectivity in the contemplative experience itself, the value of the ethnographic field loses its spatiality and concentrates on consciousness itself.<sup>50</sup> Frequently, the ethnographic subjects were geographically distant from the interviewer, spanning various parts of Europe. However, as addressed previously, conducting an ethnography of meditation necessarily entails a complete reevaluation of the concept of the ethnographic field, given that the practice of meditation has become disentangled from its historical-cultural context and has evolved into a transcultural and globalized phenomenon. Meditators are found across the globe. Studies such as this one, which focus on the general experiences that states of consciousness stimulated by meditation bring forth, are not delineated by cultural aspects within a particular cultural space. Therefore, such studies require a reevaluation of the ethnographic field in that it is no longer a space physically determined but a space of consciousness, which can and sometimes should be investigated through digital means. This includes online interviews, the sharing of images through scanning, and a dynamic ethnographic

diary that takes into account the constant sharing that meditators can provide to the ethnographer through the digital medium.

In an age of image saturation, where we are constantly exposed to an overabundance of visual material, we may become so accustomed to this inundation that we underestimate the significance of the image. Visual languages encompass not only the creation of artistic works but also extend to film and audiovisual content, ranging from documentaries to television series, all of which entail meticulous design. Photography, drawing, and video production can be regarded as important forms of personal expression. Whether to include these within the definition of art is a matter beyond the scope of this research. Rather, this project stems from the recognition of the need that arises in individuals to express their subjectivity in a unique and distinct form through the visual medium. Observing the potency of the visual medium from an anthropological perspective, I pondered whether the visual medium could serve as a stimulus for the expression of content related to the description of subjective experiences that might not be as elucidative through spoken language or ethnographic interviews.

The use of digital technology naturally comes into play as a powerful and practical tool for efficiently and rapidly collecting ethnographic material.<sup>51</sup> In this context, the use of digital tools for ethnographic research that employs images and image production as a means of expression and ethnographic data constitutes an expanded form of ethnography—a possibility that has already been extensively explored, such as in the utilization of smartphones as a means of collecting audiovisual data for ethnographic purposes.<sup>52</sup>

Within the specific objectives of this research, the use of image production as ethnographic data emerged from a highly specific necessity—namely, the need to anthropologically study the subjective experiences of individuals during contemplative acts from the perspective of their consciousness. This research evolved into a visual ethnography but not merely a conventional one; rather, it became an ethnography of states of consciousness through the visual medium.

There are subjective experiences that are challenging to describe in words, and meditation is one such example. Visual elicitation is a widely employed technique in the social sciences that utilizes visual aids as a means to facilitate more effective subjective expression. There exist cases in which simple ethnographic interviews or verbal expression prove limiting or place the subject in an embarrassing condition concerning the researcher, thus creating a dichotomy and a filter of authority. The researcher who investigates personal aspects of the subject may be perceived as invasive, and the purpose of Anthropology is better fulfilled when the subject is free to express their subjectivity as it is without concern for filtering it or making it digestible to the technical needs of a researcher. Visual elicitation sometimes overcomes these obstacles, primarily by placing the subject in the role of an expert: the one who has produced the image can best interpret it, as they are intimately acquainted with its secrets.<sup>53</sup> The narrative that reveals how the image has appeared on the page, whether it is a drawing or a photograph, proves effective in expressing the subjectivity of its creator, who is therefore the only “expert,” while the researcher assumes the role of the listener who learns. By removing this filter of authority, we thus attain greater expressive freedom. Visual elicitation has primarily made use of photographs,<sup>54</sup> but drawing also exhibits surprising potential, and in both cases, it yields promising results.<sup>55</sup>

Furthermore, as previously mentioned, aspects of subjective experience such as one’s own consciousness—phenomena involving exclusively mental dynamics including thought,

perception, or sensation—can in some instances be better expressed through the visual medium, as it implies the invocation of shapes, colors, and image densities that lend themselves to metaphorically and effectively conveying what would otherwise be less immediate and require a complex elaboration, which not all subjects feel capable of performing convincingly in words.

The potential intrinsic to Contemplative Anthropology transcends the mere examination of meditation practices themselves. By adopting this innovative approach, we can envisage a multitude of prospective applications that stand to substantively augment our comprehension of consciousness, identity, Phenomenology, and the study of multifarious cultural phenomena.

Primarily, Contemplative Anthropology proffers a distinctive lens through which to interrogate consciousness and its intricacies. Through the methodical exploration of meditative experiences, it furnishes us with unparalleled insights into the inner machinations of the human psyche. This study constitutes merely an initial presentation of collected data; however, it hints at the imperative to transcend certain methodological constraints inherent in the examination of consciousness and contemplative practices. This methodological transformation extends beyond the utilization of conventional phenomenological methodologies, for the contemplative inquiry empowers researchers to transcend the boundaries demarcating self from other, thereby imparting a novel vantage point regarding the very essence of consciousness. This paradigmatic shift challenges established paradigms concerning subjectivity and thus precipitates a thorough reevaluation of consciousness as an interconnected, nondualistic phenomenon.

Within the sphere of identity, Contemplative Anthropology provides an auspicious opportunity to disentangle the intricate tapestry of self-identification and cultural affiliations. By immersing themselves in contemplative practices, anthropologists can undertake an investigation into the transformative effects of these practices upon the conceptions of identity. Through firsthand experiential engagement, researchers can apprehend identity not as an immutable and isolating construct but as a dynamic and interconnected entity. This approach may ultimately engender a redefinition of identity as a malleable construct transcending conventional boundaries, thereby enriching our comprehension of how individuals perceive themselves in relation to others and their cultural milieus.

The very discipline of Phenomenology itself undergoes a profound reevaluation within the overarching framework of Contemplative Anthropology. The contemplative perspective serves to challenge the time-honored dichotomy separating subject and object, ushering a nondualistic dimension into the realm of phenomenological inquiry. In this application of Phenomenology, exemplified within the contours of contemplative ethnography, the traditional demarcation between observer and observed no longer subsists. Instead, it duly acknowledges the latent potential for shared experiences and mutual comprehension that supersedes the conventional constraints of phenomenological investigation. This reinterpretation of Phenomenology inherently recognizes the intricate interplay between the subjectivity of the observer and the phenomenon under scrutiny, thereby engendering a more comprehensive grasp of lived experiences.

Furthermore, the application of meditation to ethnographic inquiries, nested within the contemplative paradigm, extends its purview to encompass the examination of a diverse array of cultural phenomena extending beyond the domain of meditation itself. Consider the scenario of an anthropologist who, having diligently cultivated a contemplative practice, pivots their attention toward the rituals, ceremonies, and cultural practices prevalent across various societies. In this

instance, the meditator-anthropologist does not adopt a stance of detached observation but embraces the position of an active participant capable of assuming the experiential standpoint from a nondual perspective.

For instance, rituals concomitant with communal bonding may be scrutinized in a manner that transcends the conventional vantage point of an external observer. The meditator-anthropologist immerses themselves in these rituals not as a detached onlooker but as an individual capable of intimately apprehending the shared consciousness and interconnectedness that undergird these practices. This approach holds the promise of unearthing profound insights into the role of rituals in engendering a sense of unity and belonging within disparate cultural contexts.

Analogously, the domain of art and aesthetics stands to accrue substantial benefits from the adoption of a contemplative approach. An anthropologist endowed with a contemplative background can delve into the realms of artistic creation and reception across various cultural milieus. This exploration may encompass an inquiry into how artistic expressions serve to evoke shared states of consciousness and transcendence, thereby furthering our comprehension of the role of art within human societies.

In sum, Contemplative Anthropology has the potential to precipitate a paradigmatic shift in how we engage in the study and comprehension of both the human psyche and diverse cultural phenomena. By embracing a nondualistic perspective, this approach ushers forth innovative avenues for the exploration of the interconnected nature of consciousness, the fluidity inherent to identity, and the profound significance that underlies cultural practices. It invites us to undertake a comprehensive reevaluation of established paradigms and to embrace a more holistic and experiential approach to the discipline of Anthropology. Through the medium of contemplative inquiry, we may unearth the hitherto obscured strata of human experience and cultural significance, thereby enhancing our collective comprehension of the human condition.

## SEQUENTIAL MANDALAS

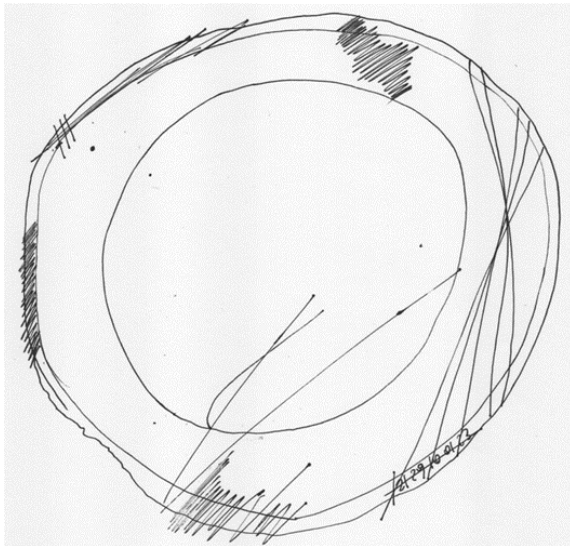


Figure 3

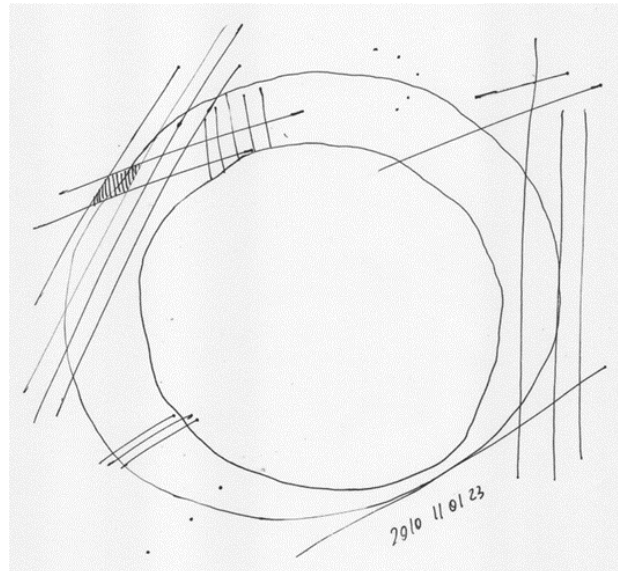


Figure 4

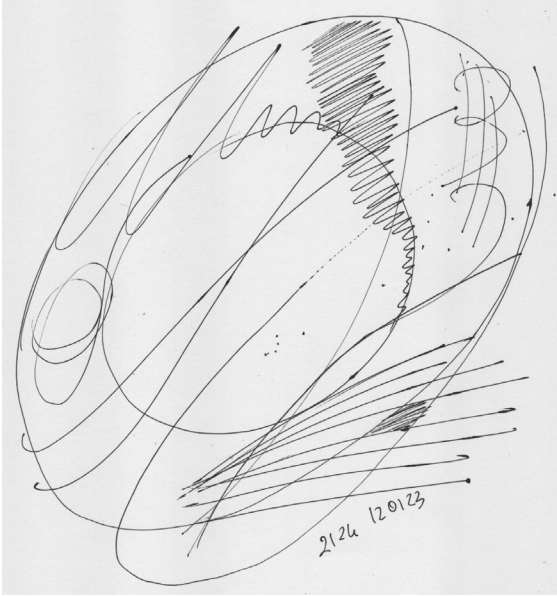


Figure 5

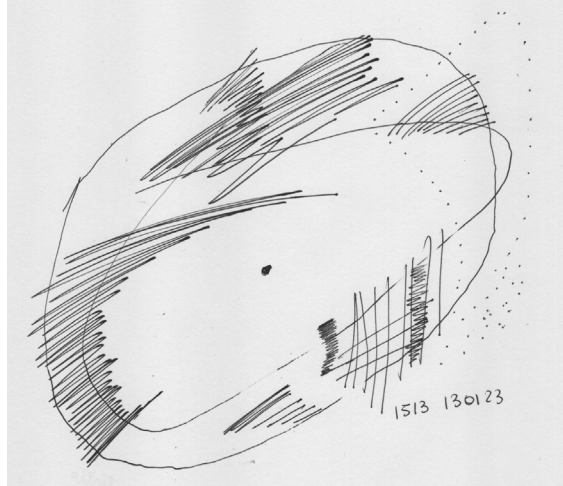


Figure 6

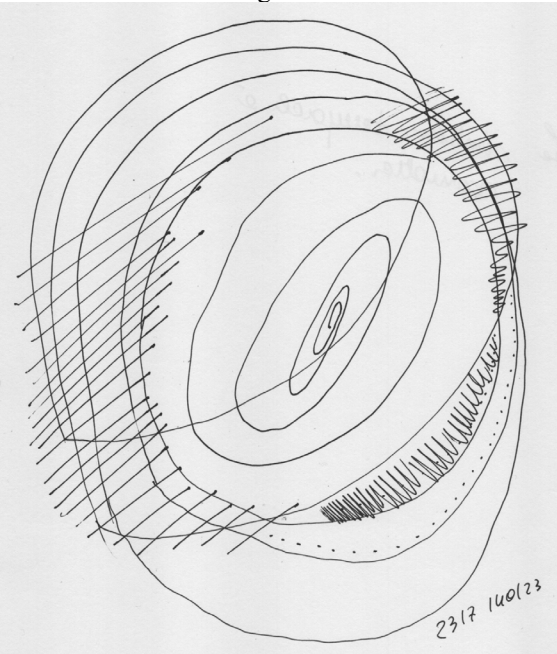


Figure 7

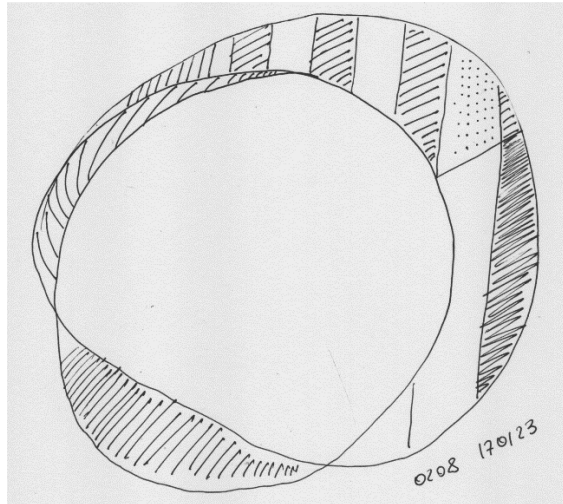


Figure 8

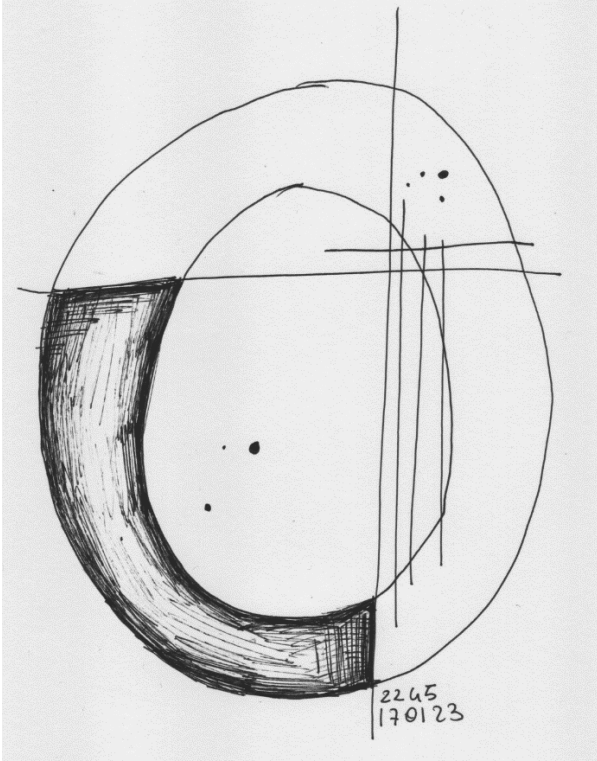


Figure 9

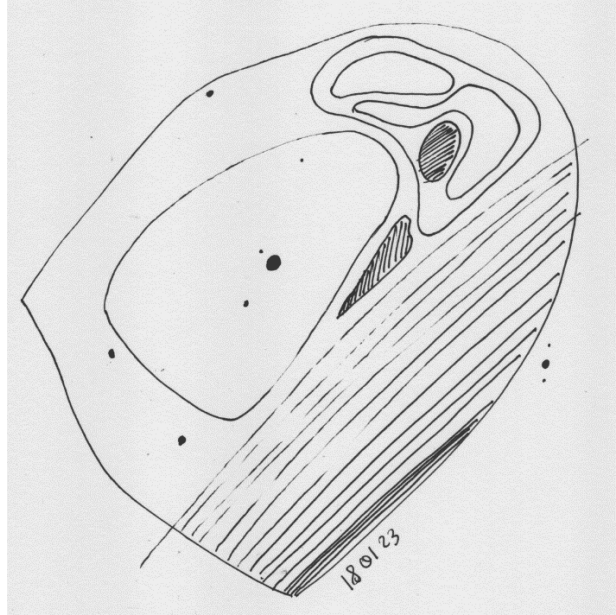


Figure 10

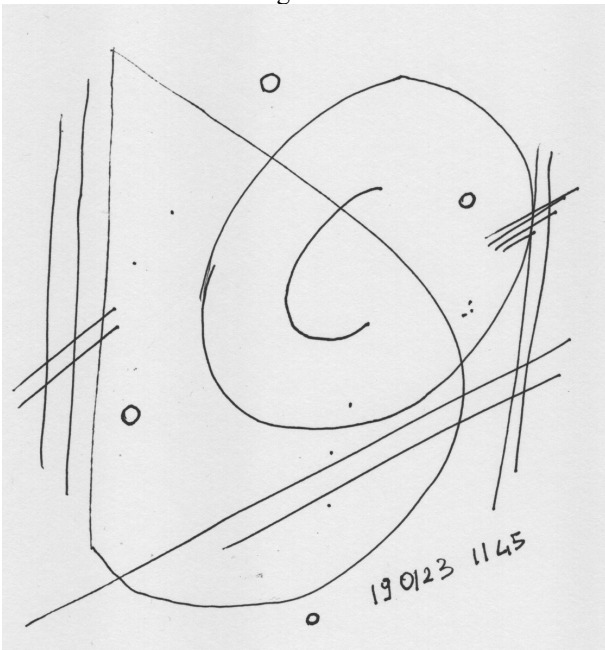


Figure 11

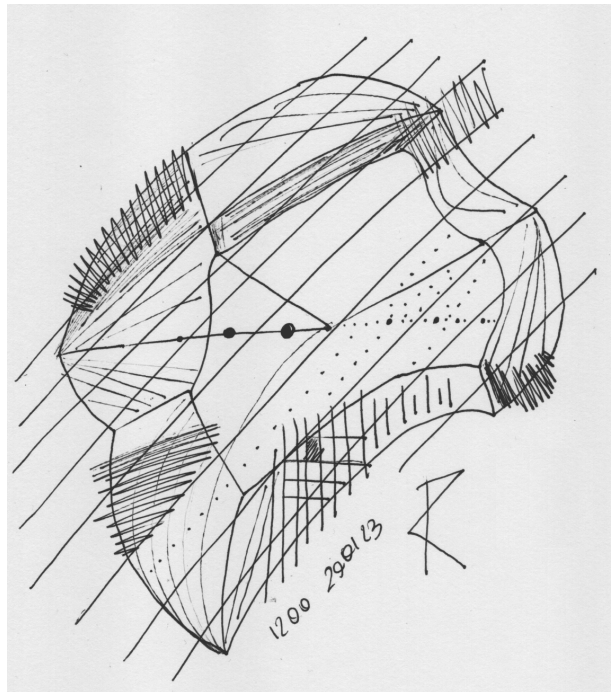


Figure 12

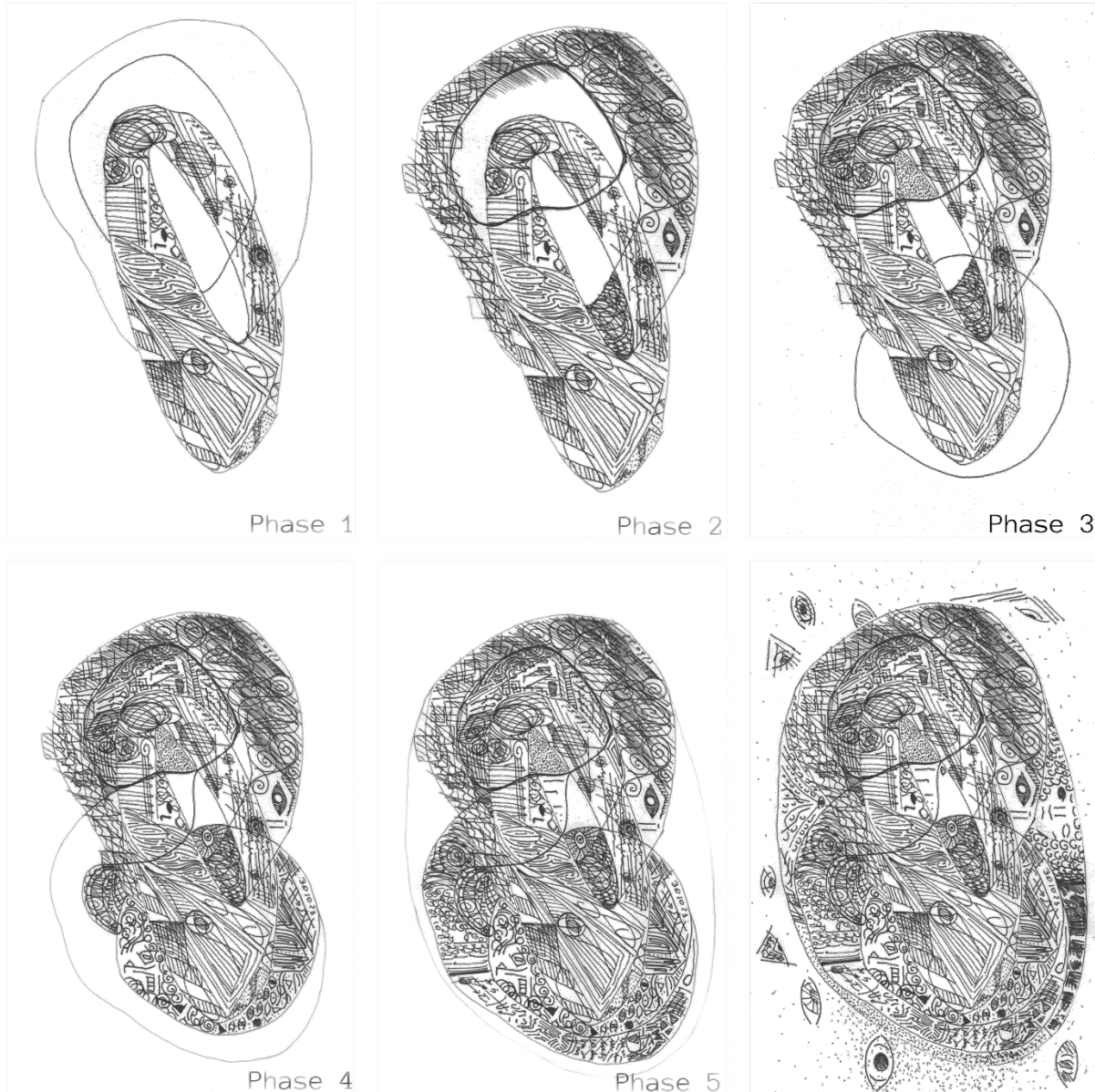


Figure 13. Sequential production of Leo's last complete mandala (fig. 2), phases 1–6, courtesy of Leo Caliandro

**Acknowledgments:** This article presents an ethnographic study employing an experimental methodology that combines visual elicitation techniques previously utilized in data collection within the social sciences. The study adapts this methodology specifically for the benefit of qualitative research, offering a case study applied to the investigation of contemplative practices. Naturally, the focus of this study revolves around how this methodology can enhance the anthropological study of contemplative practices, thus representing an initial endeavor. Subsequent works, ideally already in the process of publication, are expected to delve further into themes, case studies, and methodology. I wish to express gratitude to my mentor, Paolo Favero, and to the ViDi research center at the University of Antwerp, to which this study owes its refinement in the ethnographic dimension.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Tony E. Adams, Carolyn Ellis, and Stacy Holman Jones, “Autoethnography,” in *The International Encyclopedia of Communication Research Methods*, ed. Jörg Matthes (New York: Wiley, 2017): 1–11, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118901731.iecrm0011>.

<sup>2</sup> Federico Divino, “Mindful Apocalypse: Contemplative Anthropology Investigating Experiences of World-Loss in Deep Meditation,” *Religions* 14, no. 7 (January 2023): 941, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14070941>.

<sup>3</sup> Claire Petitmengin, “On the Veiling and Unveiling of Experience: A Comparison Between the Micro-Phenomenological Method and the Practice of Meditation,” *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology* 52, no. 1 (January 2021): 53, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15691624-12341383>.

<sup>4</sup> Agnieszka Sekula et al., “Producing Altered States of Consciousness, Reducing Substance Misuse: A Review of Psychedelic-Assisted Psychotherapy, Transcendental Meditation and Hypnotherapy,” *Psychoactives* 3, no. 2 (2024): 137–66, <https://doi.org/10.3390/psychoactives3020010>; Raphaël Millière et al., “Psychedelics, Meditation, and Self-Consciousness,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 9, no. 1475 (September 2018), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.01475>; Julian Davidson, “The Physiology of Meditation and Mystical States of Consciousness,” *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine* 19, no. 3 (1976): 345–80, <https://doi.org/10.1353/pbm.1976.0042>.

<sup>5</sup> For contemplative ethnography, see: Marjorie Faulstich Orellana, *Mindful Ethnography: Mind, Heart and Activity for Transformative Social Research* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2019). For our other major influence, micro-phenomenology has been compared to meditation for several reasons. The two practices seem to obtain analogous results in the analysis of conscious experience and the deconstruction of perceptual phenomena. See Petitmengin, “On the Veiling and Unveiling of Experience.” For instance, “we use the term ‘veil’ (in Sanskrit *āvaraṇa*: ‘what covers’) to designate what cuts us off from our experience, prevents us from being present to it. This term fits with the occulting effect of the veil (the veil hides experience, prevents seeing what is there), as well as with its distorting effect,” and in this case, “micro-phenomenological interviews applied to meditative experience and to themselves on the other hand, we have identified four main types of veiling: attentional, emotional, intentional and cognitive veils” (Petitmengin, “On the Veiling and Unveiling of Experience,” 39). The mind is also recognized to get easily distracted, “wandering” through a series of images and thoughts that leads to a “generation of a virtual scene or a succession of virtual scenes during the wandering episode” (Petitmengin, “On the Veiling and Unveiling of Experience,” 40). Both meditation and micro-phenomenological analysis aim to reduce this form of wandering: “In order to dissolve intentional veils, the micro-phenomenological interview thus uses devices to arouse a receptive attention” (Petitmengin, “On the Veiling and Unveiling of Experience,” 65).

<sup>6</sup> See Divino, “Mindful Apocalypse.” For other studies proposing nondualistic methodologies in social sciences see Eva Theunissen and Paolo S. H. Favero, “Between Self and Other Propositions for Non-Dualistic Research on VR,” in *Interactive Documentary: Decolonizing Practice-Based Research*, eds. Kathleen M. Ryan and David Staton (New York: Routledge, 2022): 147–61, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003174509>. See also T. M. S. Evens, ed., *Anthropology as Ethics: Nondualism and the Conduct of Sacrifice* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2009), <https://doi.org/10.3167/9781845452247>. On the necessity of abandoning dualistic epistemologies in the visual studies see Paolo S. H. Favero, “A Journey from Virtual and Mixed Reality to Byzantine Icons via Buddhist Philosophy: Possible (Decolonizing) Dialogues in Visuality across Time and Space,” *Anthrovision* 7, no. 1 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.4000/anthrovision.4921>.

<sup>7</sup> See Luc Pauwels, “Visual Elicitation in Interviews,” in *Sage Research Methods Foundations* (London: SAGE, 2020): 3–13, <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781526421036846496>; Luc Pauwels, “Visual Elicitation Techniques, Respondent-Generated Image Production and ‘Participatory’ Visual Activism,” in *Reframing Visual Social Science: Towards a More Visual Sociology and Anthropology* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2015): 117–38, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139017633.006>.

<sup>8</sup> Nettrice R. Gaskins, “Semantic Symbolology: The Evolution and Amplification of Cosmograms,” *Journal of Visual Art Practice* 20, no. 3 (October 2021): 259–74, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14702029.2021.1951587>.

<sup>9</sup> For their Buddhist context, see Giuseppe Tucci, *The Theory and Practice of the Mandala*, (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2001); Kimiaki Tanaka, *An Illustrated History of the Mandala: From Its Genesis to the Kālacakratantra*

(Boulder, CO: Wisdom, 2018). See also David McMahan, *Empty Vision: Metaphor and Visionary Imagery in Mahāyāna Buddhism* (London: Routledge, 2002). Within Analytic Psychology, see Patti Henderson, David Rosen, and Nathan Mascaro, “Empirical Study on the Healing Nature of Mandalas,” *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts* 1, no. 3 (August 2007): 148–54, <https://doi.org/10.1037/1931-3896.1.3.148>; Christopher T. Pisarik and Karen R. Larson, “Facilitating College Students’ Authenticity and Psychological Well-Being Through the Use of Mandalas: An Empirical Study,” *The Journal of Humanistic Counseling* 50, no. 3 (March 2011): 84–98, <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2161-1939.2011.tb00108.x>; Judson Davis, “The Primordial Mandalas of East and West: Jungian and Tibetan Buddhist Approaches to Healing and Transformation,” *NeuroQuantology* 14, no. 2 (June 2016): 242–54, <https://doi.org/10.14704/nq.2016.14.2.940>.

<sup>10</sup> See Federico Divino, “In This World or the Next: Investigation Over the ‘End of the World’ in Contemplative Practice through the Pāli Canon,” *Annali Sezione Orientale* 83, no. 1–2 (August 2023): 99–129, <https://doi.org/10.1163/24685631-12340142>.

<sup>11</sup> See Edmund Husserl, *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Psychologie. Erstes Buch: Allgemeine Einführung in die reine Phänomenologie. Erster Halbband*. Herausgegeben von Karl Schuhmann. In: Husserliana Band III/1 (Den Haag: Martinus Nijhoff).

<sup>12</sup> Buddhist contemplative practice has garnered scholarly interest precisely due to its capacity to “weaken” the perception of division inherent in the ordinary experience of individuals, who exist within a dualistically structured world regarding both personal identity (I/you or we/they) and the “things” of the world, from which we perceive ourselves as separate. However, Buddhism is not the sole tradition encompassing a discipline with these objectives. More recently, there has been a growing discourse on “contemplative practices” in the plural, acknowledging that similar experiences can be observed outside the frameworks of Buddhist meditation, while still sharing some fundamental aspects. See David Loy, *Nonduality: In Buddhism and Beyond* (Somerville, MA: Wisdom, 2019).

<sup>13</sup> Divino, “Mindful Apocalypse.”

<sup>14</sup> Claire Petitmengin, “La dynamique pré-réfléchie de l’expérience vécue,” *Alter* 18, no. 18 (2010): 168, <https://doi.org/10.4000/alter.1668>. Original: “Le méditant découvre aussi, accompagnant cette rumeur presque ininterrompue, un flot rapide d’images et de « films » intérieurs : souvenirs proches ou lointains, agréables ou non, scènes futures désirées ou appréhendées, dont seule une petite part apparaît à la conscience. Ces discours imaginaires et cette imagerie intérieure contribuent à entretenir un flux presque incessant d’émotions, dont seules les plus intenses sont ordinairement perçues. Mais ces strates discursive, imaginaire et émotionnelle occultent une dimension encore plus difficile d’accès, plus subtile.”

<sup>15</sup> Petitmengin, “La dynamique pré-réfléchie de l’expérience vécue,” 165. Original: “la part de notre expérience qui est vécue sans être reconnue, sans être immédiatement accessible à la conscience et à la description verbale.”

<sup>16</sup> Divino, “Mindful Apocalypse.”

<sup>17</sup> Claire Petitmengin, “Describing One’s Subjective Experience in the Second Person: An Interview Method for the Science of Consciousness,” *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 5, no. 12 (December 2006): 233, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11097-006-9022-2>.

<sup>18</sup> Christopher James Santiago and Melinda Kiefer Santiago, “Dream Alliance: Art, Anthropology, and Consciousness,” *Anthropology of Consciousness* 34, no. 2 (September 2023): 264–77, <https://doi.org/10.1111/anoc.12218>.

<sup>19</sup> Petitmengin, “Describing One’s Subjective Experience,” 236.

<sup>20</sup> For a description of the holographic model see Federico Divino, “Dualism and Psychosemantics: Holography and Pansematism in Early Buddhist Philosophy,” *Comparative Philosophy* 14, no. 2 (July 2023): 1–40, [https://doi.org/10.31979/2151-6014\(2023\).140204](https://doi.org/10.31979/2151-6014(2023).140204). For a discussion of such a substrate in Buddhist Philosophy, see William S. Waldron, *The Buddhist Unconscious: The Ālaya-Vijñāna in the Context of Indian Buddhist Thought* (London: Routledge, 2003).

<sup>21</sup> Petitmengin, “La dynamique pré-réfléchie de l’expérience vécue,” 180. Original: “l’analyse des descriptions que nous avons recueillies suggère qu’au cours du processus de prise de conscience, plus l’attention relâche sa tension vers les objets extérieurs pour entrer en contact avec l’expérience dite « intérieure », plus la distinction entre « intérieur » et « extérieur », soi et non soi, se réduit.”

- <sup>22</sup> Claire Petitmengin, “On the Possibility and Reality of Introspection,” *Kairos. Revista de Filosofia & Ciência* 6 (2013): 193.
- <sup>23</sup> Gary Moody, “‘Dancing with Spirits’—Spirit Art and Spirit-Guided Experiential Ethnographic Techniques,” *Anthropology of Consciousness* 34, no. 2 (September 2023): 554, <https://doi.org/10.1111/anoc.12201>.
- <sup>24</sup> Moody, “‘Dancing with Spirits,’” 557.
- <sup>25</sup> Moody, “‘Dancing with Spirits,’” 558.
- <sup>26</sup> Moody, “‘Dancing with Spirits,’” 559–60.
- <sup>27</sup> Moody, “‘Dancing with Spirits,’” 556.
- <sup>28</sup> Moody, “‘Dancing with Spirits,’” 580.
- <sup>29</sup> Santiago and Santiago, “Dream Alliance,” 6–7.
- <sup>30</sup> Robert Wallis, “Art and Shamanism: From Cave Painting to the White Cube,” *Religions* 10, no. 1 (January 2019): 5, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel10010054>.
- <sup>31</sup> John Brough, “Soma and ‘Amanita Muscaria,’” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 34, no. 2 (January 1971): 331–62, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0041977X0012957X>.
- <sup>32</sup> Estelle Orrelle, “Identifying Iconographic Evidence for a Mushroom Cult in the Preliterate Southern Levant,” *Time and Mind* 15, no. 3–4 (September 2022): 277–96, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1751696X.2022.2119096>.
- <sup>33</sup> Wallis, “Art and Shamanism,” 10.
- <sup>34</sup> Paolo S. H. Favero, “The Image Is a Cure,” *Visual Studies* 38, no. 2 (2023): 196–98, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1472586X.2023.2198406>.
- <sup>35</sup> Robert R. Desjarlais, “Healing through Images: The Magical Flight and Healing Geography of Nepali Shamans,” *Ethos* 17, no. 3 (September 1989): 290, 297, <https://doi.org/10.1525/eth.1989.17.3.02a00020>.
- <sup>36</sup> Kate Crosby, *Esoteric Theravāda: The Story of the Forgotten Meditation Tradition of Southeast Asia* (Boulder, CO: Shambhala, 2020), 146.
- <sup>37</sup> Kate Crosby, “Tantric Theravāda: A Bibliographic Essay on the Writings of François Bizot and Others on the Yogāvacara Tradition,” *Contemporary Buddhism* 1, no. 2 (June 2008), <https://doi.org/10.1080/14639940008573729>; Federico Divino, *The Apparent Image: The Phenomenon, the Void, the Invisible* (Padua: Diodati, 2024), 139–50.
- <sup>38</sup> Lance Selwyn Cousins, *Meditations of the Pali Tradition: Illuminating Buddhist Doctrine, History, and Practice* (Boulder, CO: Shambhala, 2022), 165.
- <sup>39</sup> Cousins, *Meditations of the Pali Tradition*, 168.
- <sup>40</sup> The appearance of luminous phenomena or the adoption of metaphors of light inherent to contemplative practice is a fact already codified in Buddhist texts. See, for example, notes 10, 11, and 21 in Federico Divino, “An Anthropological Outline of the Sutta Nipāta: The Contemplative Experience in Early Buddhist Poetry,” *Religions* 14, no. 2 (January 2023): 172, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14020172>. These effects are documented also for modern meditators. See Jared R. Lindahl, Christopher T. Kaplan, Evan M. Winget, and Willoughby B. Britton, “A Phenomenology of Meditation-Induced Light Experiences: Traditional Buddhist and Neurobiological Perspectives,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 4, no. 973 (2013), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2013.00973>.
- <sup>41</sup> Cousins, *Meditations of the Pali Tradition*, 159.
- <sup>42</sup> On the value of autoethnography for anthropological research see Ralf Buckley, “Autoethnography Helps Analyse Emotions,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 6, no. 209 (February 2015), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2015.00209>. Also, David Butz and Kathryn Besio, “The Value of Autoethnography for Field Research in Transcultural Settings,” *The Professional Geographer* 56, no. 3 (August 2004): 350–60, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0033-0124.2004.05603004.x>. And for a brief overview of the method see Carolyn Ellis, Tony E. Adams, and Arthur P. Bochner, “Autoethnography: An Overview,” *Historical Social Research* 36, no. 4 (2011): 273–90.
- <sup>43</sup> In this context, it is crucial to emphasize the significance of involving first-person perspectives in studying consciousness. In this regard, several studies have already been published focusing on the examination of consciousness through the qualitative analysis of firsthand experiences. See, for example, Dusana Dorjee, “Defining Contemplative Science: The Metacognitive Self-Regulatory Capacity of the Mind, Context of

Meditation Practice and Modes of Existential Awareness,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 7 (November 2016), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2016.01788>.

<sup>44</sup> See Divino, “Mindful Apocalypse,” and Divino, “In This World or the Next.”

<sup>45</sup> Ernesto de Martino, *The End of the World: Cultural Apocalypse and Transcendence* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226820569.001.0001>.

<sup>46</sup> Dhanesh D. Binda, Carol M. Greco, and Natalia E. Morone, “What Are Adverse Events in Mindfulness Meditation?” *Global Advances in Integrative Medicine and Health* 11 (April 2022), <https://doi.org/10.1177/2164957X221096640>; Divino, “Mindful Apocalypse.”

<sup>47</sup> Pierre-Noël Denieuil, “L’identité selon Claude Lévi-Strauss. De la substance à la structure,” *Raison présente* 169, no. 1 (Spring 2009): 86, <https://doi.org/10.3406/raipr.2009.4144>.

<sup>48</sup> Dhiraj Murthy, “Digital Ethnography,” *Sociology* 42, no. 5 (October 2008): 837–55, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038508094565>.

<sup>49</sup> Magdalena Góralaska, “Anthropology from Home: Advice on Digital Ethnography for the Pandemic Times,” *Anthropology in Action* 27, no. 1 (March 2020): 46–52, <https://doi.org/10.3167/aia.2020.270105>.

<sup>50</sup> Urban Kordeš, Aleš Oblak, Maja Smrdu, and Ema Demšar, “Ethnography of Meditation: An Account of Pursuing Meditative Practice as a Tool for Researching Consciousness,” *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 26, no. 7 (August 2019): 184–237.

<sup>51</sup> Angela Delli Paoli and Valentina D’Auria, “Digital Ethnography: A Systematic Literature Review,” *Italian Sociological Review* 11, no. 4S (2021): 243–67, <https://doi.org/10.13136/isr.v11i4S.434>.

<sup>52</sup> Paolo S. H. Favero, “Doing Audio/Visual/Sensory Ethnography with and on Smartphones—A Possible Roadmap for an Expanded Ethnography,” *International Review of Sociology* 33, no. 2 (July 2023): 1–22, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03906701.2023.2233295>.

<sup>53</sup> Keith C. Barton, “Elicitation Techniques: Getting People to Talk About Ideas They Don’t Usually Talk About,” *Theory & Research in Social Education* 43, no. 2 (2015): 179–205, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00933104.2015.1034392>.

<sup>54</sup> Xanthe Glaw, Kerry Inder, Ashley Kable, and Michael Hazelton, “Visual Methodologies in Qualitative Research,” *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 16, no. 1 (December 2017), <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406917748215>; Roman R. Williams and Kyle Whitehouse, “Photo Elicitation and the Visual Sociology of Religion,” *Review of Religious Research* 57, no. 2 (June 2015): 303–18, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13644-014-0199-5>.

<sup>55</sup> Anna Bagnoli, “Beyond the Standard Interview: The Use of Graphic Elicitation and Arts-Based Methods,” *Qualitative Research* 9, no. 5 (November 2009): 547–70, <https://doi.org/10.1177/146879410934362>; Kerstin Stieber Roger and Constance Blomgren, “Elicitation as a Mind-Set: Why Visual Data Matter?,” *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 18, no. 1 (March 2019).