

COLOUR-KASINA MEDITATION

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INTRODUCTION

Kasina objects (*kasina* meaning “all, complete, whole”) are among the meditation subjects recommended by the Buddha that are suitable for developing concentration conducive to the four absorptions (*jhana*).¹ For a number of reasons meditation practice using *kasina* objects has not been very popular in the West. One of the reasons may be that the method is not amenable to be taught in groups – as is ordinarily done in meditation retreats. Kasina meditation requires that each meditator use their own *kasina* device and their surrounding environment must be free from visual stimulants. Another reason may be that it is not easy to find qualified teachers who have had experience with the method. Unfortunately information on this method of practice is limited and often vague also. Furthermore, some teachers discourage the practice of *kasina* meditation on the grounds that it is psychologically dangerous. This is an unjustified notion, although as with any kind of meditation practice a teacher should closely supervise students practicing *kasina* methods.²

Colour-*kasina* meditation may prove to be very useful for some meditators who have found limited success using the breath or other subjects of meditation. Like any meditation subject or method there are advantages and disadvantages to *kasina* practice. Among its advantages, the colour-*kasina* meditation object has the quality of being clearly defined in terms of its size, texture, and optical resolution (since it is a visual object), whereas the breath, likely the most common meditation subject, is a tactile object that is harder to define initially due to its “fuzzy” quality. Indeed, as meditators deepen their mindfulness and concentration in a particular sitting, the *kasina* object will appear to be clearer and more well-defined. In the case of the breath, however, as one gains more serenity the object becomes more subtle and is harder to apprehend. This is not a disadvantage of breath meditation *per se*, since its very demand for higher mindfulness and concentration stimulates the development of these faculties. But for a beginner it may be easier to grasp a very concrete object such as a colour-*kasina* during the initial stages of development. During the development of serenity using *kasina* devices, the gradual improvement in mindfulness and concentration become evident by the emergence of clear signs (visual and/or mental) called *nimitta* that mark definite stages of the process. During practice, these *nimitta*, or “signs,” facilitate the meditator’s assessment of progress by establishing clear reference points. One drawback to the practice is that *kasina* devices have to be made and are cumbersome to store and transport. The main drawback of *kasina* meditation is that it may place excessive strain on the eyes in some individuals, giving rise to eye irritation or fatigue. One should try, within reason, not to discontinue the practice if problems of this nature arise, although relief will normally occur during the regular intervals (or longer periods) during which the eyes are closed. In any case, bear in mind that ordinarily meditators have to put up with aches and pains over long periods of time as they develop their regular sitting practice.

BASIC INSTRUCTION

The following instructions are given in brief and include some aspects not mentioned in the classical texts. However, meditators are advised to consult available texts that deal with points not mentioned in this article.³ Initially one should find and consult a teacher with experience in *kasina* meditation, then one should prepare one or several *kasina* devices (see instructions at the end of this article), and seek a suitable place for practicing. The area of practice must be quiet and

well-lit. One must make sure the practice area is also clean and tidy. The background against which the *kasina* device is placed must not be cluttered or show visually-distracting features. One's sitting posture must be comfortable (any arrangement of the legs/arms will do as long as the back is self-supported and straight). The image should be imprinted on a suitable surface such as a plate. Usually a coloured or white circle with a black border centred on a square white surface will do (squares, triangles or other regular polygons could be used as suitable images, as well).

The *kasina* device should be placed between 1.5 and 3 meters away from the eyes. One then stares at the centre of the coloured image without considering the border or the remaining white area. One may blink one's eyes to relieve them of tension or fatigue. Focusing on the colour one may initially repeat to oneself (mantra-like) the corresponding name of the colour (e.g. "blue, blue, ...") for a short while until the initial focus on the object has been established and one is increasingly less distracted. Then all verbalization is abandoned and one focuses exclusively on the "blueness," with firm intent to subdue or keep at bay other thoughts or sensory experiences.

The time one should spend practising *kasina* meditation varies from person to person. In general terms one would spend as much time as one ordinarily invests in developing any other meditation subject. One must stare at the *kasina* object continuously for several minutes, or sometimes more than one hour, in order to acquire a strong retinal image. This will appear as a persistent "complementary" or "negative" image imprinted on the retina that manifests when closing the eyes. For instance, when one uses a blue *kasina* the retinal image appears as a yellow or orangey-yellow image with the black border appearing as a brightly "lit" whitish ring. The background will appear as a dark shadow, further enhancing the brightness of the retinal image by effect of contrast. When signs of visual fatigue manifest, one should mindfully close one's eyes. With eyes now closed, and *without the slightest interruption* in the train of attention, one should continue to focus on the (virtual) retinal image that has arisen from gazing at the coloured physical image. To a large extent, the clear definition and intensity of the retinal-image generated depends on the degree of mindfulness and concentration exercised. The appearance of other signs or *nimittas*, described below, may take days, weeks, months or years depending on the individual practitioner, but the retinal image always appears after a short period of staring at the object.

The retinal image will naturally remain present for a few seconds or minutes and will then start to fade. At this point one usually opens one's eyes and again gazes at the working image without a break in focus. On occasions one may notice that if the eyes remain closed, the retinal image may disappear for a brief moment only to reappear in attenuated form after a few seconds. The cycle whereby the image appears and disappears may repeat itself a few more times. One may use these faded images as objects of focus. The advantage of doing so is that the mind tries to enhance the elements that are slowly fading out. Thus, after many months or years of practice the mind may generate the image solely by visualization, no longer requiring physical prompting.

There will be occasions when the mind will experience the hindrance of lethargy and torpor, making it hard to sustain one's attention on the physical object. In this case, after some time of focusing on, say, the blue *kasina*, one may quickly turn the device around and focus on the yellow *kasina*. (This is one of the reasons why it is suggested that these two images be created back to back on a suitable surface: see below.) The yellow circle on the newly presented physical image will then show itself *highly enhanced* in brightness and definition. This occurs because the yellow physical image is, so to speak, being "amplified" by the retinal counter-image of blue – which is also yellow. The effect tends to rekindle one's *interest* in and sustained attention upon the object and in so doing dispels any lethargy and torpor once present. Meditators may try this trick whenever interest in the object wanes.

As one advances in the practice over days, weeks or months, one may notice that the mind stabilizes and is able to maintain a lucid attention on the object for longer periods. At some point the meditator may find that the retinal image is so strongly infused by such attention that it will start to “overlap” with the direct visual perception of the physical image. Occasionally the practitioner may find that what used to be the white background area surrounding the object acquires a light tone corresponding to the colour of the main (*kasina*) object. The meditator may even feel that the surrounding area has turned into the colour of the object. Since the retinal image is the “negative” of the physical image, the “overlap” will result in the effective disappearance of the physical image – even while one continues, open-eyed, to stare at it. This gives rise to a new kind of image which is actually dark black (a dark shadow; we may call this *nimitta* the “eclipsed” image).⁴ At this crucial point the meditator must not slacken effort but must continue striving to sharpen the focus of attention on the new *nimitta*.⁵

If one is able to sustain one’s effort, this “eclipsed” image will eventually – and some times quite suddenly – disappear, giving rise to a remarkably bright image (known as the “counterpart sign”).⁶ This image will show itself with remarkable brightness akin to the disk of the full moon or the sun’s disk (assuming the *kasina* object used is circular), as seen on a hazy or foggy day. When it appears, this bright and perfectly uniform mental image marks the entrance into access- or neighbourhood-concentration. In access concentration the mind is temporarily free from the mental hindrances and will experience a level of stability, calm and satisfaction superior to the ordinary waking state. The stage may now be set to achieve the strong serenity levels of *jhana* or “fixed penetration” (*appana-samadhi*).

The practitioner must strive to sustain the access concentration state for as long as possible. One must not rest content with the initial, momentary success which has been achieved by generating the counterpart image – as it may be very difficult to reproduce the result at a later session. During these elusive and sporadic periods of attainment, effort must be made to reproduce it as many times as possible – especially during the *same* sitting session. At this stage one must strive to develop one’s level of proficiency by guarding the ability to generate the counterpart sign. This means that one must be careful not to indulge in distractions or be careless in one’s purity of deed, word and thought; one must also guard the sense-doors, be moderate in eating, mindful and self possessed, and must aspire with perseverance to eliminate the hindrances and maintain concentration. The need for continued practice is important in order to stabilize the attainment. When the *kasina* object is mastered completely, the meditator should be able to generate the counterpart sign without requiring the use of a physical object. At the stage of mastery the meditator should also be able to modulate the size of the *nimitta* at will (as is described in the texts).^{3a, b, d}

With such mastery of the *kasina* the meditator may remain in the stillness of the concentrated state for long periods of time and pursue further progress in the development of serenity. If the meditator has subsequently mastered the attainment of first *jhana* (as described in the commentarial texts) he/she may pursue the development towards the quiet and stillness of the second *jhana*. At this stage all discursive thought has ceased and volitional impulses will be almost entirely suppressed, yet the potential will remain at hand to let go of the remaining jhanic factors, leading the mind to the remaining material *jhana* states.⁷

The ultimate benefit of these attainments is that the profound stillness they engender offers the practitioner the most suitable conditions to attempt, in a systematic manner, to gain insight

knowledge. In this next stage of development, as soon as the mind exits the concentration state and begins to take up any object (pre-determined or not), it must thoroughly examine that object reflectively in the light of any of the three characteristics of existence: impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, or not-self. This sequence of events is commonly known as the “development of insight preceded by serenity.” Having set out in brief this description of the *kasina* method, however, we will not take up this topic here.

PREPARATION OF A KASINA DEVICE

Preparation of the *kasina* device must be carried out with great care and attention. Since the device is an important element conducive to insight and concentration it must be treated carefully and should always be kept and placed in appropriate spots where risk of damage is minimized. It must not be treated as an ordinary object or tool. It is a good idea to prepare and try to practice with the four traditional *kasina* colours: white, yellow, red and blue.⁸

Suggested dimensions:

Coloured circle diameter = 9”

Circle centred on square of side = 27”

Black border for circle, thickness = (a generous) 3/4”

These measurements are derived from the standard 9 inch diameter circle described in the texts. The square side length for the plate or flat surface (plywood or other suitable rigid material) is obtained by multiplying 9 inches by 1.618 (the golden ratio or golden proportion) 3 times and dividing the product by the square root of 2. The border thickness (actually .81”) results from dividing 9 inches by 1.618 (5 times). Creating the device based on these proportions results in a harmonious-looking figure that is pleasing to the eye.

Initially, you can try indigo blue on one side of the plate and a vivid, school bus yellow for the figure on the other side. Acrylic paint, or other suitable media, subsequently coated with glossy lacquer for the circle and border (leaving the white surface non-glossy) works very well. The fewer irregularities in the coloured image and border, and the less texture coarseness in the *kasina* surface, the better – particularly if the device is intended for use by a beginner.

NOTES

1) See for example: a) *Mahasakuludayi Sutta* (Majjhima Nikaya,77), in *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, trans. Bhikkhu Ñanamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, Wisdom Publications: Boston, 1995; see also: www.saigon.com/~anson/ebud/majjhima/077-mahasakuludayi-e1.htm; b) *Sangiti Sutta* (Digha Nikaya, 33), in *The Long Discourses of the Buddha*, trans. Maurice Walshe, Wisdom Publications: Boston,1995.

2) Individuals with a history of psychotic disorders, on medication or treatment for such disorders (including depression) should not practice this type of meditation. If hallucinations or recall of repressed memories manifest in individuals who have never experienced psychotic disorders, they should consult with their teacher as soon as possible.

3) See for example, a) *Vimuttimagga* (The Path of Freedom) by the Arahant Upatissa, trans. Rev. N.R.M. Ehara, Soma Thera, and Kheminda Thera, pp.124-27, Buddhist Publication Society (BPS): Kandy, Sri Lanka, 1995; b) *The Jhanas in Theravada Buddhist Meditation*, by Ven. Henepola Gunaratana, BPS; c) “The Mystery of the Breath Nimitta” by Ven. Sona, in

<http://www.baynet.net/~arcc/dhamma/nimitta.html>; d) *Visuddhimagga* (The Path of Purification) by Ven. Buddhaghosha, III.97, V.12-V20, XIII.95, XVII.143, BPS: Kandy, Sri Lanka.

4) The fading out of the working object at this stage is analogous to the fading away of the characteristic sign of the object in breath meditation – which usually happens as a result of its turning more subtle as the body and mind approach serenity. This would also mark an equivalent stage of serenity development using a *kasina* object.

5) Individuals of a speculative temperament are advised not to fall into the temptation of jumping to conclusions or try to come up with theories regarding any visual effects experienced in practice.

6) This is what the texts call the counterpart sign or *patibhaga-nimitta*, which may also be referred to as *aloka-kasina* (light *kasina*) when the sign is generated using a colour *kasina*. In summary, there are four signs (*nimitta*) to consider in the process of reaching access concentration using the *kasina* method: 1) The coloured *kasina* object itself (the “physical” or “working” image); 2) The retinal image (the “negative” visual image of the coloured *kasina* object); 3) The “eclipsed” image (the dark shadow visual image arising when 1) and 2) neutralize each other); and 4) The bright counterpart sign (a mental image).

7) In a sense, the whole process of developing deep concentration, from beginning to end, is a motion of the mind seeking the characteristics of non-proliferation and non-diversity of perception. Thus, one selects the *kasina* devise from amongst the myriad of possible objects; then one focuses attention on a particular feature within the main (composite) object; next, focus is directed onto an image which is enhanced and more refined than the original; and then one continues by discerning a more refined single aspect in relation to subsequent visual or mental objects of focus.

8) The choice of a suitable colour to practice with may be determined by the teacher based on the student’s temperament. The commentaries indicate that colour *kasinas* are particularly suited for greedy temperaments (see Ref. 3d). If the meditator has strong aesthetic inclination towards a particular colour, it may be a good first choice. In general, white would be suitable for most temperaments; yellow has an energizing quality and is a good subject for those who are lethargic or tend to be depressed; blue is suitable for one of greedy or angry temperament due to its cooling quality (but the reason one may use it may be that it also has a refreshing quality when one practises in a hot climate); red is a warm colour that may be suitable for a person who is apathetic or who practices in a cold climate. One may experiment by practising with a particular colour for a few days, then switching to the next for the same number of days, and so on, until one is able to assess by experience what is personally more suitable.
