

Historical and Textual Development of Light Contemplation (*Ālokasaññā*) across Buddhist Traditions

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Introduction

The light contemplation (*ālokasaññā*) appears consistently across Buddhist traditions as a method for cultivating wakefulness, knowledge, and spiritual vision. From the Pāli Nikāyas to Mahāyāna visualization practices, light functions as both an antidote to drowsiness and a vehicle for developing the “divine eye” (*dibbacakkhu*) and “knowledge and vision” (*ñāṇadassana*). Despite its widespread presence, scholarly attention has often treated light meditation as subsidiary to other practices. This paper addresses the research problem of tracing how the light contemplation evolved doctrinally and practically from early Buddhism through Sarvāstivāda, Mahāyāna, and Esoteric traditions. The significance lies in clarifying light meditation’s role as a foundational skill that supports both serenity (*śamatha*) and insight (*vipaśyanā*), thereby offering contemporary practitioners a historically grounded understanding of its utility.

Objectives

The primary objective of this study is to reconstruct the evolutionary lineage of the light contemplation (*ālokasaññā*) across major Buddhist traditions. To achieve this, the research answers the following three specific questions:

What were the original psychological functions and operational instructions of *ālokasaññā* within the Early Buddhist Texts (Pāli *Nikāyas* and Chinese *Āgamas*), and how did they differ from its scholastic systematization in the Northern Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma literature?

How did late canonical texts and meditation manuals utilize the light contemplation to neutralize the psychological side effects of impurity and skeleton meditations?

In what ways did early Mahāyāna devotional texts and later East Asian Esoteric manuals transform *ālokasaññā* from meditation object (*nimitta*) into a soteriological vehicle?

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Methodology

This study utilizes a qualitative, comparative philological and historical-critical research design. The methodology centers on the cross-canonical textual analysis of primary sources preserved across two major distinct scripts and languages: the Pāli Canon and the Chinese Tripitaka.

Data Collection

Primary text selection was divided into four distinct historical and doctrinal strata:

Early Buddhist texts: The Pāli *Aṅguttara Nikāya* (AN), *Majjhima Nikāya* (MN), and *Samyutta Nikāya* (SN), paired with their corresponding parallel texts in the Chinese *Āgamas*, specifically the *Madhyama Āgama* (MĀ) and *Samyukta Āgama* (SĀ).

Northern Abhidharma & Yogācāra: Xuanzang's translations of the *Abhidharma-dharmaskandha-pāda-śāstra* (T26, no. 1537) and the *Yogācārabhūmi-śāstra* (T30, no. 1579).

Northern meditation manuals (*Dhyāna Sūtras*): Kumārajīva's translations of the *Dhyānasamādhi-sūtra* (T15, no. 614) and *The Discourse on the Essential Secrets of Meditation* (T15, no. 613).

Mahāyāna, Post-Canonical & Esoteric Treatises: The *Aparimitāyuh-sūtra* (T12, no. 362), *Amitāyur-dhyāna-sūtra* (T12, no. 365), *Essentials of Contemplation* (T15, no. 617), *Satyasiddhi-śāstra* (T32, no. 1646), and *Śubhakarasiṃha's Meditation Manual* (T18, no. 917).

Data Analysis Technique

The data was analyzed using a three-tier textual framework designed to track conceptual shifts while maintaining historical accuracy:

Philological alignment: Tracking key technical terminology—specifically the Sanskrit/Pāli terms *āloka* (light), *saññā/saṃjñā* (perception), *obhāsa/avabhāsa* (aura/illumination), and *nimitta* (mental sign)—and mapping them directly to their early and late Chinese translations (e.g., 明相, 光明想, 淨相).

Structural staging analysis: Dissecting the exact procedural position of light within the contemplative itineraries of each text. This step evaluates whether light is treated as a baseline prerequisite, an intermediate counter-agent, or a final realization.

Doctrinal contextualization: Analyzing the socio-historical shifts that motivated these technical changes, evaluating how changes in monastic settings, the rise of devotional paths, and the development of internal visualization theories altered the practice.

Text Selection Criteria and Comparative Limitations

Text selection followed four criteria: (a) explicit engagement with the semantic field of light (*āloka*/光明) in a procedural meditation context; (b) representation across distinct doctrinal phases (Early, Abhidharma, Mahāyāna, Esoteric); (c) availability of parallel Pāli-Chinese versions to enable structural comparison; and (d) historical influence on subsequent tradition formation.

Regarding the comparative use of Pāli and Chinese sources, the Pāli Canon is recognized as the most authoritative and original canonical language for Early Buddhism. The Chinese Āgamas, while translations from Northern Sthavira traditions, maintain close textual and doctrinal relationships with their Pāli counterparts. These classical Chinese translations represent some of the earliest extant renderings of Indic texts—most originally in Sanskrit—and often preserve multiple translations of the same sūtra from different periods or schools. When both Pāli and Chinese sources present parallel teachings, the convergence provides strong corroborative evidence for the authenticity of early Buddhist doctrine. Consequently, this study consistently quotes Pāli sources first, followed by Chinese parallels, thereby according primacy to the Pāli tradition while drawing upon Chinese materials for verification, contextual expansion, and insight into Northern transmission lineages. This approach acknowledges the interpretive nature of translation—particularly in works by Kumārajīva and Xuanzang—while leveraging the comparative method to mitigate translational biases through cross-referencing and functional analysis.

Results

The cross-canonical data reveals that the light contemplation underwent a clear, multi-phased trajectory across different traditions. Rather than remaining a static concept, its procedural role transitioned from an externalized, sensory corrective device into an internalized, expansive vehicle for ultimate liberation.

1. Chronological and Doctrinal Progression of Light Contemplation

In the earliest textual layer, represented by AN 7.62, MN 10, SN 47:1, and the *Madhyama Āgama*, light contemplation is primarily designated as a pragmatic, psychophysical antidote. Operating under the technical terms *ālokasaññā*, its procedural function is tightly bound to physical regulation. Meditators are

instructed to clear mental dullness and sloth-and-torpor by matching their internal state to external daylight conditions or by maintaining a firmly resolved mental image of daytime brightness. At this stage, light is localized and corrective, functioning strictly as a functional mechanism to stabilize the mind for subsequent mindfulness practices.

As preserved in the *Abhidharma-dharmaskandha-pāda-śāstra* (T26, no. 1537) and the *Yogācārabhūmi-śāstra* (T30, no. 1579), northern scholasticism transformed light into a structural counter-agent. Transitioning from a casual remedy to a formal meditation object labeled *āloka-nimitta*, the light contemplation was systematically interlaced with skeleton contemplation (*asubhabhāvanā*). By teaching the mind to project a brilliant stream of light onto the visual image of decaying bones, scholastic masters used the luminous sign to actively strip away existential distress and neutralize emotional aversion (*pratigha*), turning a grim practice into a highly stable concentration state.

In early Mahāyāna texts like the *Aparimitāyuh-sūtra* (T12, no. 362) and the *Amitāyur-dhyāna-sūtra* (T12, no. 365), light contemplation evolved into a profound soteriological portal. Utilizing terms like *avabhāsa* and *śubha* (無量光 / 淨相), the practice was thoroughly internalized. Rather than observing light to correct energy levels or balance decay, the practitioner is instructed to gaze at the physical setting sun (日觀) and systematically internalize its disk shape. This mental sign then serves as a conceptual bridge, shifting from a simple light image into the infinite, cosmic radiance of Buddha Amitābha, thereby facilitating a direct devotional entry for rebirth in the Pure Land.

Finally, post-canonical works such as the *Satyasiddhi-śāstra* (T32, no. 1646) and Buddhaghosa's *Visuddhimagga* treat light as a precise concentration catalyst. Operating through terms like *kaṣiṇa-āloka* (白色光明), these manuals detail the creation of an expansive, artificial light device to achieve the highest form abstractions (*dhyāna*). However, this stage introduces a vital diagnostic boundary: while the light must be expanded to grant mental mastery, getting attached to these lights is explicitly condemned as a dangerous reification of the self (計色為我), emphasizing that light is a tool to be discarded once deep insight is reached.

2. Analytical Findings on Meditative Mechanics

A key structural finding of this research concerns the *Dhyāna Sūtras* (T15, no. 613 and T15, no. 614). In early canonical settings, impurity meditation required close observation of rotting corpses, a practice that historically led to intense psychological complications, including existential dread and suicidal ideation among monastic groups.

The textual data shows that Northern scholastic masters solved this clinical vulnerability by introducing *ālokasaññā* directly into the bone practices. As preserved in *The Discourse on the Essential Secrets of Meditation*, the practitioner first views the body breaking down to its skeleton, but is immediately commanded to perceive a blazing white light streaming between the joints (白骨流光出). This synthesis fundamentally altered the emotional character of the meditation object, transmuting a potentially traumatic image of death into a highly stabilized, pleasant mental sign (*śubha-nimitta*). The light acted as an emotional buffer, allowing the meditator to safely establish deep states of absorption characterized by joy and mental pliability while completely subverting the danger of existential aversion.

Furthermore, the text of *the Essentials of Contemplation* (T15, no. 617) shows how the Mahāyāna tradition finalized this movement inward. The practice requires the meditator to generate a pure, abstract concept of light in the open sky. This acts as an intermediate staging area that bridges the gap between raw sensory perception and infinite cosmic visualization. The light ceases to be an external counter-measure; instead, it is re-framed as an immediate, clear entryway designed to witness the form of the Buddha, ultimately providing a direct visual methodology for experiencing the fundamental, empty radiance of the mind.

Esoteric Buddhism represents perhaps the most sophisticated development of the light contemplation. Texts associated with Śubhakarasiṃha (T18, no. 917) describe practitioners visualizing a luminous moon-disc before them and gradually expanding it until it encompasses the entire universe. In these traditions, light is explicitly identified with wisdom (*vidyā*). The luminous sphere symbolizes the intrinsically pure nature of mind and serves simultaneously as an object of concentration and a revelation of ultimate reality (T18, no. 917, p. 945b). The practice therefore unites *śamatha* (calm abiding) and *vipaśyanā* (insight) within a single contemplative process. As the meditation deepens, distinctions between self and object disappear. The practitioner experiences a field of radiant clarity in which all phenomena are understood as empty and unobtainable. Nevertheless, the texts caution against attachment even to this experience of luminosity.

Modern teacher Pa-Auk Tawya Sayadaw systematizes these classical instructions, teaching that even preparatory concentration (*parikamma-samādhi*) radiates light, and that access concentration (*upacāra samādhi*) produces light bright enough to penetrate internal organs and discern ultimate realities (*paramatthas*). He insists that any visualization-based practice—including loving-kindness, contemplation of bodily parts, and skeleton meditation—all rely upon the development of luminous perception; for the best results, they must be preceded by developing the fourth *jhāna*'s brilliant light as a tool (*Knowing and*

Seeing. p. 59). Particularly noteworthy is the similarity between these modern instructions and earlier Buddhist sources. The use of light to support visualization, the association between luminosity and concentration, and the progression toward deeper knowledge all reflect themes already present in the Nikāyas and later meditation manuals. Modern practice therefore provides evidence for the enduring vitality of this contemplative tradition.

Discussion

The light contemplation emerges not as a peripheral or merely preparatory technique but as a vertically integrated method capable of generating profound states of concentration and insight. Several interpretive conclusions follow.

First, light meditation spans the apparent polarity between *śamatha* and *vipaśyanā*. The Esoteric tradition explicitly states that light contemplation serves both simultaneously because light directly symbolizes wisdom (*vidyā*). The same visualization that stabilizes attention (*śamatha*) also reveals the luminous, empty nature of mind (*vipaśyanā*).

Second, the adaptation of light from *aśubha*'s impurity-focus to *śubha*'s purity-focus represents a significant doctrinal development. Sarvāstivāda's innovation—contemplating white bones not as repulsive but as radiant—transformed a potentially dangerous practice (inducing suicide) into a life-affirming one. This suggests that Buddhist meditation theory recognized the need for flexible, temperament-matched methods.

Third, across all traditions, the light contemplation is consistently framed as a means, not an end. The Satyasiddhi-śāstra explicitly warns that mistaking light *nimittas* for a self constitutes error. Śubhakarasiṃha cautions against reifying either light or emptiness: "it is not to be taken as a concept of emptiness." This meta-instruction preserves light meditation as a provisional tool rather than an object of attachment.

Fourth, the developmental arc from localized light sign → immeasurable light → emptiness *samādhi* → divine eye → knowledge and vision suggests a coherent trajectory. The Bodhisattva's own practice, as recorded in the *Upakkilesa Sutta* (MN 128), confirms that when concentration becomes immeasurable, vision becomes immeasurable, enabling perception of immeasurable light and forms.

Implications for the field include: (1) a corrected understanding of light meditation as a complete path rather than merely an antidote to drowsiness; (2) historical validation for contemporary teachers who prioritize light development as foundational; and (3) a resource for comparative studies between Buddhist light visualization and similar practices in other contemplative traditions.

Nowadays mindfulness of breathing is used widely by meditation teachers. We may consider instead using the light contemplation, or light combined with other methods such as loving-kindness or *subha* (skeleton/white bones). Ultimately, the light contemplation endures because it addresses a universal meditative challenge—how to sustain wakefulness and clarity without grasping—and offers an elegant solution: use light, become light, then let even light go.

Keywords - light contemplation, ālokasaññā, Buddhist meditation, divine eye, luminosity

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