Artistic Feeling and Meditation

Michael Howard

“There slumber in every human being faculties by means of which he can acquire for himself a knowledge of higher worlds…Only one question remains—how to set to work to develop such faculties.”

*Rudolf Steiner, Knowledge of Higher Worlds*

“It should be remarked that *artistic feeling*, when coupled with a quiet introspective nature, forms the best preliminary condition for the development of spiritual faculties.”

*Rudolf Steiner, Knowledge of Higher Worlds*, p. 41-2

Meditation can be described in general terms as a way to transform and develop our self. More specifically, meditation can have the purpose, as indicated above by Rudolf Steiner, of developing the inner faculties to perceive and know spiritual realities directly rather than according to belief.

Steiner represents the view that the facts and laws of the spirit can be known as a spiritual science in the way that the facts and laws of the natural world are known by natural science. Both natural science and spiritual science depend on the human being developing the prerequisite faculties and capacities to be a natural scientist and spiritual scientist. For Steiner:

“All the forms do is set the process going that creates the work of art. The work of art is what the soul experiences when it feels the shape of the forms.”

*Rudolf Steiner, December 28, 1914, Art as Seen in the Light of Mystery Wisdom,*
“A true understanding of the matter cannot be reached if observation of the forms is based solely on intellectual explanation. It is necessary to contemplate the forms with true artistic feeling.”

Rudolf Steiner, October 1907

A new relationship to art opens up to us when we see the physical art object as only the formative agent of the true work of art, our self that is shaped and transformed through our experience of the color and form of the art object. Color and form work most deeply upon us when we are capable of exercising artistic feeling. What is artistic feeling and how is it developed?

The artistic mediums of color, form, musical sound, human speech and movement not only have physical attributes but also qualitative ones that are not physical. Like everything in the material world color and form have a quantitative dimension that can be measured, weighed and counted, but also a qualitative dimension.

We experience warmth and coolness that is clearly physical in nature that can be measured with a thermometer. However, we have other experiences of warmth and coolness that is not physical and cannot be measured by a thermometer.

For example, when we meet someone and shake their hand we can note the relative warmth or coolness of their hand. At the same time, we may perceive a certain warmth or coolness in their demeanor or radiating from their eyes. It is particularly striking and instructive when we meet someone who has cold hands while radiating inner warmth.

In such instances, there may well be brain wave and other neurological activity that occurs simultaneous to such inner experiences, but there is no need or justification for regarding physical and measurable phenomena as more valid or real than inner experiences. Our experience of non-physical warmth and coolness is as real as physical warmth and coolness. Human nature is simply embedded within multiple realities that are so subtly woven together that they can seem to be one reality. However, our experience of inner warmth and coolness as distinct from outer warmth and coolness is a perfect example of two distinct realms of experience that we describe with the same words—physical warmth and coolness belong to the physical/material world, and inner warmth and coolness belong to our inner, non-physical or soul spiritual world.

Even with physical warmth/coolness, we do not necessarily need a thermometer to determine when the day is warmer or cooler because our bodies are quite attuned to the rise and fall of the temperature. In a similar way, we can become quite sensitive to other people’s inner moods and feelings. The perception of the inner life of others depends in part on our attentiveness to outer phenomena such as facial expressions and body language. In addition, we must also become increasingly attentive to our feelings, as it is our feeling nature that perceives the qualities experienced by others as much as by our self. In order to perceive accurately and objectively the inner experiences of others requires that we learn to distinguish between our personal feelings that manifest as sympathy and antipathy, or likes and dislikes, and our potential to feel the rich and diverse spectrum of non-physical qualities.
In order to develop an objective capacity for perceiving qualities we must strive to set aside, if only for a time, our personal and subjective feeling reactions of like and dislike. By simply not dwelling on our like or dislike, we create an inner space of stillness and openness whereby the qualitative dimensions of the world appear before us. By strengthening our capacity to perceive and experience inner qualities as vividly and accurately as physical qualities, we develop a capacity for experientially knowing a dimension of our selves and the world that is veiled if not hidden from our full awareness.

The term introduced by Rudolf Steiner, and used in this essay, to describe this heightened capacity to perceive and experientially know the qualitative element present in all sense perceptions, is artistic feeling. Artistic feeling can seem a humble capacity, however, its full significance lies in the fact that it allows us to perceive the invisible in the visible, the spiritual in the physical world including ourselves. With this preliminary understanding of artistic feeling we have a foundation for exploring the role this faculty can play in meditative or contemplative practice.

I  Color Exercise:

I begin with a lengthy quote from Arthur Zajonc’s book, Meditation as Contemplative Inquiry, because it so effectively introduces a direction that deserves further elaboration:

“Buddaghosa recommends to the fifth-century monk that he make a bouquet composed entirely of yellow flowers...In this way the...yellow will become the object for meditation...concentrating only on the color yellow...Having fully immersed himself in the yellow, he averts his gaze and allows the nimita or “afterimage” to arise. The nimita is not the complementary physiological afterimage that we all see when we saturate the retina with a color sensation. Buddhaghosa’s description makes it clear that the meditant is seeking another kind of afterimage, one that is the interior correlate to the outer impression...Into this open field of awareness there emerges the echo or afterglow of the sense impression.

...Rudolf Steiner recommended a similar practice...we need to deepen our sensual engagement with the world of color, sound, movement—in deed with all of sense existence. In this view the sense world is not to be abandoned when we take up a contemplative life, but rather our experience is to be transformed. The interior aspects of the outer world need to be uncovered and given our full attention.

...Steiner recommends a color exercise...We are to stand beneath the blue sky, and gaze into the azure color above us, uniting ourselves with it...allowing the blue to fully permeate us...a distinct feeling arises in us...Attempting to name such feelings is always a danger...But if we had to put words to the experience, a feeling of devotion might be the best description.

...Both Buddhaghosa and Steiner are advocating what I term, a “yoga of the senses.” First we are to concentrate on the color, becoming one with it and allowing it to become us. After identifying with the color as much as possible, we move to an open state of awareness in which an “afterimage” arises. Elsewhere Steiner describes the importance of the afterimage phase in these words: “The movement caused by the external impression has finished, and for most persons that is the end of the matter. This is, however, where the pupil must take his or her start....”
...We only truly come to know the character of one color through comparison with others...With this in mind one can appreciate how important it is to work with more than one color meditation. The variety allows us to map the inner soul space corresponding to the entire color space.

Neither Buddhaghosa or Steiner ends the practice with color at this point. The generation of the first afterimage or nimita is followed by further exercise that use the afterimage itself as the object of meditation...What has been the fruit of open awareness becomes the object of concentration. A second empty space is sustained, a new void opens, and a higher-level and purer afterimage presents itself. The journey leads to the archetype of yellow and blue, which has neither form nor the least trace of externality. Yellow loses its outer object nature and is experienced as a particular state of pure being...

The exercises I have described for color can be applied to other sense experiences as well...”

Arthur Zajonc, Meditation as Contemplative Inquiry, p.102-6

Both Buddhaghosa and Steiner suggest taking a phenomenon from the sense world—a bouquet of yellow flowers or the blue sky—as objects for meditation. Looking at the yellow flowers and the blue of the sky are important steps in order that we familiarize ourselves with them as objective phenomena in the world, so we are not simply projecting subjective memories or associations. While we have many such natural examples of color to draw upon, in the end, it is the color alone that we are to contemplate. Thus with the flowers, we must bracket out the shape of the flower or with the sky, we must ignore any clouds. Although the yellow of a flower or the blue of the sky have a luminosity that physical pigments lack, nevertheless, it can be effective to do this exercise by making patches of color using paint, pastels or pencils on paper.

Whether we use the color of a natural object or patches of color on paper, we begin as Arthur indicates:

“First we are to concentrate on the color, becoming one with it and allowing it to become us. After identifying with the color as much as possible, we move to an open state of awareness in which an “afterimage” arises.”

I would like to build upon this basic exercise by describing several variations to choose from but also can be done as a sequence that build upon each other. In the process we will have opportunity and reason to clarify two different meanings of the term “afterimage” that can cause confusion:

1. Using colored pencil, paint or pastel, slowly and meditatively, make a patch of orange-yellow—approximately 2" in diameter with a more or less circular boundary—in the upper left quadrant of a white piece of paper. In the upper right quadrant, make a comparable patch of a light, almost green-yellow. In the lower left quadrant make a patch of purple-blue and in the lower right, a green-blue patch. Ensure that the patches are nicely spaced so there is white between the color patches. See Figure 1.
2. Direct your gaze to the orange yellow patch, fixing your gaze in the center for a slow count of 10—find or make a little spec in the center to help hold your focus. Then move your gaze to a white area of the page where you can expect to see a luminous color known as the afterimage. Try to attend to this new and different color for as long as possible—typically it will fade within another count of 10. Also try to note the exact hue of the afterimage that with the orange-yellow will tend towards a blue-purple.

3. Follow the same process with the greenish-yellow, in order to behold the afterimage that will be in the direction of a red-purple. Then try staring at the two blues where you can expect to see an afterimage that is yellow-orange with the purple-blue, and red-orange with the green-blue.

4. Set aside the four physical patches of color, and with your eyes closed or open as you choose, try to form a picture or impression in your mind’s eye of each of the four original patches of color, one at a time. Do not spend a lot of time on each color, but simply give a few seconds to calling up the orange-yellow, then the green-yellow. Going back and forth between the two colors every few seconds can help evoke the colors, particularly if that proves difficult at first. Do the same with the two blues.
5. This can be taken a step further by first picturing the green-yellow and the green-blue as separate colors, but then picturing them blending to form green. This can be refined so one pictures an uninterrupted spectrum from a green-yellow to a yellow-green, to middle green, to blue-green, to green-blue. Creating such a color spectrum with colored pencils or paints can be done initially and as often as needed to help visualize it imaginatively. Eventually, one can draw or paint an entire color circle in order to be able to vividly visualize a color circle imaginatively. See Figure 2. In this way, we learn to experience color less as discrete entities and more as a flowing medium that are nevertheless in a lawful relationship to each other. In this way we awaken and foster a mobility of soul that remains rooted in objective reality.

6. Next, we can try to form mental pictures of the afterimage colors, that is the non-physical, more luminous blue and red-purples, and yellow and red-oranges. Again going back and forth between two afterimages helps evoke an impression of each color.

7. Now, return to the four physical patches of color, and again spend 10 seconds or more focusing on each color. This time, however, our purpose is not to see the afterimage, but to explore another dimension of color. At first, we will naturally experience each color as a patch of physical substance lying on the page. However, if we can quiet our mind without falling asleep, we may notice we are no longer gazing upon the color from outside but rather begin to feel ourselves dreaming into the color, or the color permeating our inner self. In either case, the outer duality of the color and our self as distinct entities falls away, and instead, we experience the color and our...
inner self as one. After doing this with the orange-yellow, gaze into the green-yellow until you feel yourself entering into and becoming one with this color. If you have any difficulty in feeling a color, move your gaze to another one, even going back and forth every few seconds, so that the contrast of two colors, such as the orange-yellow to the green-yellow, can help awaken a more vivid impression of the different qualities of each color. Once you do feel the color, try to dwell in that feeling experience as long as possible. Do the same with the two blues.

8. When speaking about the feeling experience of each color, it is essential to be clear that we are not concerned with any associations or sympathies and antipathies we may have towards these colors. If associations, or like and dislike arise for us, it is usually helpful to recognize and honor them, in order to better set them aside and discover their objective qualities. In comparing one yellow with the other, for example, sooner or later we can feel warmth emanating from the orange-yellow and coolness from the green-yellow.

9. Lastly, we now try to evoke within ourselves the same feeling qualities that we experienced when gazing upon the physical patches of color. For some this will include an inner picture of the colors, but this is not essential. For some, it may be easier and more natural to create inwardly and dwell upon the pure feeling experience—such as the inner warmth and coolness—than it is to picture the colors.

This last experience is what Rudolf Steiner and Arthur Zajonc refer to as the ‘afterimage’. Arthur draws attention to the fact that this term ‘afterimage’ is used to describe to two different experiences:

“Having fully immersed himself in the yellow, he averts his gaze and allows the nimita or “afterimage” to arise. The nimita is not the complementary physiological afterimage that we all see when we saturate the retina with a color sensation. Buddhaghosa’s description makes it clear that the meditant is seeking another kind of afterimage, one that is the interior correlate to the outer impression…Into his open field of awareness there emerges the echo or afterglow of the sense impression.”

Arthur goes a long way to clarifying the matter, but I would argue more forcefully that it would be better to have two different terms to avoid any confusion or misunderstanding in having the same word applied to two very different experiences. Secondly, the term afterimage implies a visual picture of the complementary color that appears spontaneously after we stare for a few moments at a particular color. However, where it is not an image but a feeling experience that is being referred to the term afterimage does not convey this impression. Such a feeling experience is more akin to a musical experience and for this reason terms such as echo or resonance would seem more suited to conveying this. In addition, it is worth noting that we can feel music resonate within us not only as we hear it physically, but also after the physical music has ended. Similarly, we can feel the warmth or coolness of a color resonate within us not only as we look at a physical patch of color, but also after the physical color is no longer visible. For these reasons the word “resonance” describes such a feeling experience whether or not the color and form are physically visible. When speaking about the felt quality of color or form or any other sense phenomena, we might better speak of the ‘color-resonance’ of a color quality, or ‘form-resonance’ of a form quality.
II Form Exercise:

We will now consider another meditative exercise that is comparable to the one we have just looked at, only this time it draws upon the world of form instead of color. In this instance, we will build upon the following exercise from Rudolf Steiner based on the seemingly simple form of a triangle:

"I will not only draw a triangle and let it stay as it is, but I will make certain demands on your imagination. You must think to yourself that the sides of the triangle are in continual motion. When they are in motion, then out of the form of the movements there can arise simultaneously a right-angled, or an obtuse-angled triangle, or any other.

In this field we can do and also require two different things. We can make it all quite easy; we draw a triangle and have done with it. We know how it looks and we can rest comfortably in our thoughts, for we have got what we want. But we can also take the triangle as a starting-point, and allow each side to move in various directions and at different speeds. In this case it is not quite so easy; we have to carry out movements in our thought. But in his way we really do lay hold of the triangle in its general form; we fail to get there only if we are content with one triangle. The general thought, “triangle” is there if we keep the thought in continual movement, if we make it versatile.”

Rudolf Steiner, Human and Cosmic Thought, lecture 1, Jan. 20, 1914, Berlin

Building upon this basic indication from Rudolf Steiner, I will again develop a number of variations that can also be done sequentially:

1. With a ruler and pencil draw several triangles on a piece of paper. It is not necessary to make any measurements or technical constructions, but simply make straight lines with a ruler to draw an equilateral triangle, an isosceles triangle with a narrow base, another isosceles triangle with a broad base, a right-angled triangle, an asymmetrical triangle and so on. See Figure 3
2. Set aside these physically drawn triangles, and with eyes closed or open, picture an equilateral triangle in your mind’s eye. After a few moments, picture the base of the equilateral triangle narrowing to create an isosceles triangle that is taller than it is wide. Then imagine the base widening so that the isosceles triangle becomes wider than it is tall. Then picture the left side of the triangle pivoting until it becomes a right-angled triangle. Allow the left side to pivot further to the left so that the right angle becomes an obtuse angle. Of course, other triangles can be imagined, but the main point is to picture the change in angle and length of the sides that cause the transformation from the one triangle to another. This should only take a few minutes to go through once, and so it follows naturally to reverse the process or go through the same sequence again. In doing so, we can expect to experience the separate static triangles coming to life as a dynamic, continuously moving triangle.

3. Arthur Zajonc offers an excellent description of the third step:

“In this exercise we have moved from a crude sense image (a symbol of a triangle) to a static mental image, to a triangular image in movement, and finally through the flux of individual triangles we leap to the pure thought: triangle...we must reach even beyond triangles in motion to the pure thought: triangle. The thought “triangle” is not dead or fixed, but generative. Thinking and feeling our way into the exercise we realize that the idea of the triangle is the “agent” (“being”).”

Arthur Zajonc, Meditation as Contemplative Inquiry, p. 158-61.

We start with a physical sense object, in this case the triangles drawn on a piece of paper, in order to enhance our capacity to picture the image of these triangles in our mind. Drawing several different triangles helps us go from picturing separate fixed triangles to picturing a moving triangle that embodies all triangles. By picturing not just one fixed triangle but a living mobile triangle, we are more prepared to experientially know the living concept or archetype, “triangleness”.

3. Another way to approach the living concept of triangleness is to picture a circle along with a triangle so we can compare them. Here too we can imagine a circle being transformed into a triangle with one or more intermediate forms. Naturally, we can reverse the process and picture a triangle becoming a circle. See Figure 4. Just as we can more readily experience the quality of an orange yellow when juxtaposed to a green yellow, likewise our experience of “triangleness” will be more vivid when compared to a circle. At the same time, we can expect to experience the ‘circleness’ of the circle as compared to the triangleness of the triangle.

Figure 4
5. There is another important possibility when using variations of a triangle as objects for contemplation. However, it is one that poses a challenge to our conventional idea of a triangle as indicated by Arthur:

“A very particular relationship is expressed in the triangle, which distinguishes it from the circle, square, or any other form. Mathematics is, one could say, all about pure relationships. Everything extraneous is taken away. It is absurd to think of a “roundish” or “squareish” triangle. It would be no triangle at all…”

Figures 5 shows a construction that produces the three forms of Figure 6. One is clearly an equilateral triangle, but what do we call the other two forms. If by definition, a triangle has straight sides then the two curve-sided forms cannot be called triangles. In spite of their convex or concave curved sides, the three-sided nature of these two forms, at the very least, reminds us of a triangle. Do we not experience an element of “triangleness” in these curve-sided forms as much as in the straight-sided one? This suggests that straight sides are not necessarily essential to triangleness but are simply one kind of triangle along with the others we looked at earlier.
Following the example of painters who speak of an orange-yellow compared to a green-yellow, I believe we have reason and justification for expanding our concept of triangle to include what I will call a convex triangle and a concave triangle, in addition to a straight triangle.

6. Additionally, these three variations on a triangle open up another dimension for employing such forms as objects of contemplation in the following manner:

i) Using a compass and ruler, draw the forms shown in Figure 4 and 5 at least once, if not several times.

ii) Drawing these three variations of a triangle prepares us to picture each one imaginatively as vividly as possible.

iii) After picturing them individually, try to picture one transforming into the other. For example, start with the straight-sided triangle, and then picture the three sides bowing out slightly to form the convex triangle.

iv) Then reverse the process, so that the convex triangle returns to the straight triangle, but then continue so that the three sides bow in to form the concave triangle.

v) Conclude the sequence by imagining the concave triangle becoming the straight-sided triangle.

To begin with, imagining these three triangular forms changing from one to the other is simply a variation on Steiner’s exercise of picturing a straight-sided triangle moving from equilateral to isosceles, to right-angle, and so on. Both exercises offer ways to develop greater mobility in our thinking, and in that sense, a more dynamic and living thinking compared to conventional, mechanistic thinking.

7. However, unlike the variations on a straight-sided triangle, these three variations introduce another dimension to our contemplative exercise. As we could have a feeling
experience with the different yellow and blue patches of color, we can also awaken to a feeling experience with these variations on the triangle form. Whether we attend to the three triangles of figure 5 as physical drawings or simply picture them imaginatively, as we transform one to the other, we can become aware of a different quality resonating in our feeling. At first we need not spend too much time with each form, as it is the comparison of the convex triangle to the straight-sided one that will awaken two distinct feeling experiences. As we become more familiar with these feeling experiences, then we will have reason to allow the felt quality of each form to resonate as long as we are able—ten seconds is good—so that our feeling experience might intensify, before inevitably fading.

Out of such an intensified feeling relationship to these three variations of a triangle, we might name them: the budding triangle, the crystalline triangle, and the withering triangle. The actual names are not as important as the experience that the names point to.

**From Concentration to Meditation:**

In summary, the ability to form mental pictures of colors or forms that at first are pictured as static but eventually come into movement, are excellent concentration exercises. However, when we are able to contemplate the felt qualities of yellowness, blueness, and convex, straight and concave triangles, free of any direct sense impression, we enter the realm of meditation proper. When, for example, we contemplate the different qualities of straightness, convexity, and concavity, we are approaching an element of “beingness”. When we not only perceive color and form dynamically, but in addition are able to dwell imaginatively within their objective qualities—their warmth or coolness, or their budding-ness, crystalline-ness and withering-ness—we are meditating upon their spiritual nature. In this way the cultivation of *artistic feeling* becomes a form of meditative practice.

*Artistic feeling* is a human capacity to develop and exercise for its own sake. However, as it becomes an established and reliable part of who we are, we can anticipate that it will open new horizons in both our outer and inner lives.