Visualization and eidetic contemplation practices within esoteric Buddhism in East Asia constitute a vast and complex subject, and one that is as yet not fully understood. At the most basic level, the practices discussed in this essay center on the eidetic contemplation of an object—an image of a divine figure in personified or symbolic form, or any of a variety of other potent images—where that act is central to a ritual program described as leading to a higher state of being, consciousness, or understanding.

Certain styles of (and frames for) eidetic contemplation are usually said to be central to the esoteric tradition as a whole, particularly when they are understood as the activities named by the third of the tradition’s emblematic “three mysteries” of body, speech, and mind. These three, which are re-workings of the much older model of the “three modes of action” (sanye 三業), are in the esoteric tradition the means by which (and the media in which) spiritual realities are made manifest in the person of the practitioner: in the corporeal body as postures (mudrās, etc.), in speech as incantations (mantras, dhāranīs, etc.), and in the mind as carefully cultivated images. Perhaps simply because they are easier to describe and depict in texts and paintings, historians are much clearer on the natures of the first two “mysteries” in premodern esoteric Buddhism. Postures are described and depicted in surviving sources, often with great clarity; and the syllables of incantations are written out, with elements of their pronunciations often nuanced in appended ritual directions.

When it comes to the mystery of “mind”—the mental operations engaged in within ritual—however, the scholar of premodern esoteric practice faces, as Robert H. Sharf has noted, a host of “complex epistemological problems.” Indeed, the scholar is usually presented with only a single word, which most often features the element 観, pronounced

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1 In my use of the term “eidetic contemplation” I follow Bogel 2009 and Sponberg 1986.
in Mandarin Chinese as guan (Jpn. kan, Kor. gwan). This graph has a range of referents in Buddhist writings, including meditative discernment or analysis, insight, eidetic contemplation of an image or other object, mental envisioning, or simple imagining. In technical doctrinal writings—and Tiantai writings are usually privileged here, though such uses of guan are hardly limited to them—the term centers on the first two meanings in this list. Accordingly, in these contexts it is commonly translated as “discernment,” the “seeing” of the true nature of existence: that it is “empty,” “ungraspable,” “evanescent as foam,” etc. In most cases, this basic sense of guan is maintained in esoteric usages—a point that is not always sufficiently understood.

In part for this reason, esoteric practices of contemplative imagination should be understood as distinct from (but related to) Buddhist accounts of the attainment of mystic visions. Descriptions of such visions—of all the buddhas of the multiverse arrayed before one’s eyes, to use a prominent example—have long been central to the Buddhist imagination. They are found as well in a range texts connected with esoteric traditions, from early dhāraṇī scriptures to the ritual manuals of later traditions. Indeed, Mahāyāna and esoteric Buddhist literatures are notably marked by descriptions of the vastness and luminosity of the cosmos that astound the imagination. Closely related to these visionary accounts are paintings in shrines and temples of the infinite array of buddhas said to fill the cosmos, or of dazzling pure lands and mythscapes, such as those found in many of the cave-shrines of Mogao, near Dunhuang.

Such discursive accounts and visual art reaffirm the profoundly visual and visionary character of Buddhism, a character expressed equally in writing, art, and architecture. They also affirm the great soteriological potency the tradition attributes to certain forms of seeing. These elements of Buddhist visual culture and textual imagination are related to practices of eidetic contemplation, in the narrow sense that I understand them in this essay, in that both reproduce potent divine presences in the form of images. Indeed, the reproduction of such potent

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3 For an excellent discussion of accounts of such phenomena in China, see Birnbaum 2004.

4 For illuminative discussions of Buddhist visualization and seeing in Buddhism that find greater areas of overlap with visualization practices than are acknowledged in this essay, see (for example) Bogel 2009, especially 189–205; Wang 2007; and Yiengpruksawan 2004.