

**ABSTRACT:**

# **Meditation-inspired Visioning: An Experiential Method to Envision the Future**

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As humans we are urged to imagine and realise radically different, more desirable, and most importantly more sustainable futures (Hulme 2020; Pereira et al. 2019). However, the dominance of dystopian scenarios of irreversible environmental and social collapse, along with business-as-usual scenarios, hinder progress and contribute to a gap in futures literature relating to imagining desirable visions for humanity and how to reach them (Bennett et al. 2016; Rana et al. 2020). In this short paper, I share an experiential, meditation-inspired visioning exercise that can aid in enhancing people's capacity to envision desirable and motivational futures.

#design

#futures thinking

#visions

#meditation

While there exist various persuasive tools, such as scenarios or backcasting, to aid organisations in exploring and reacting to probable futures (van der Duin 2016), there are relatively fewer methods that focus on supporting individuals in imagining and creating *desirable* futures (Wiek & Iwaniec 2014). An increasing number of sustainability researchers, therefore, highlight the need for visioning exercises to enable individuals to think beyond dominant narratives and develop inspiring and creative visions that generate futures literacy, change value systems, and motivate people to alter their behavior in the present so as to reach that vision (Bennett et al., 2016; Pereira et al. 2019; Rana et al. 2020; Wiek & Iwaniec 2014).

A number of studies provide evidence for the positive effects of meditation on increased self-awareness, creativity and divergent thinking (e.g. Colzato et al. 2012; Ding et al. 2014), which suggests the relevance of meditation and its possible uses in facilitating the exploration of personal desires for the future, opening vistas of experience beyond the customary and the already-given.

To demonstrate this, I conducted a series of experiments, employing an integrated design and futures thinking approach. In these experiments, I have designed a meditation-inspired visioning exercise using breath, sound and storytelling (figure 1) to guide participants (students) into an immersive space for imagination that allowed ideas, thoughts, sensations and emotions to arise and be observed (Colzato et al. 2012). In this exercise, I implored the participants to immerse themselves in and surrender themselves to a speculative reverie:

*I'd like you to take a last deep breath in 2021, slowly prepare yourself to take all the energy that you can to catapult yourself behind the boundaries of 2021 and to land in this beautiful world of 2050 ...*

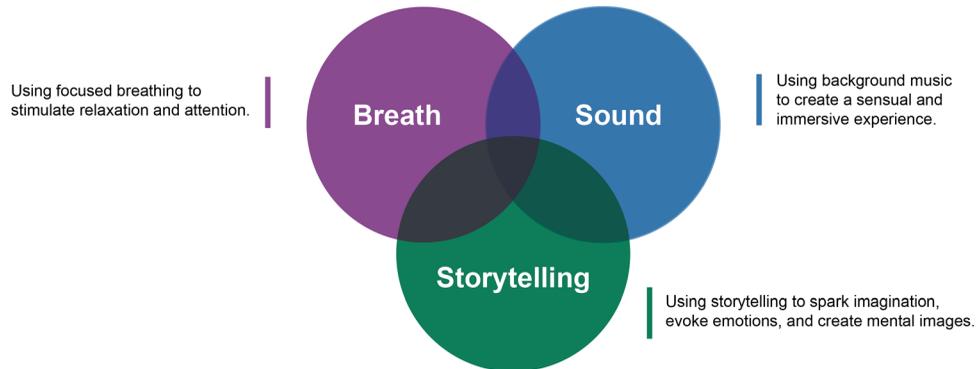
Colzato et al. 2012

The participants were invited to simply observe and acknowledge whatever surfaced in their minds. After travelling back to the present, the participants took the time to write down and visualise their visions before sharing them within their group (figure 2). The exercise was used at the beginning of a workshop aimed at developing desirable visions of the future and ideas for policy interventions that could support the transition towards these visions.

The value of the exercise was revealed in follow-up interviews, in which the participants reflected on how the exercise projected them beyond their own immediate space, time, and modes of thinking, into one in which they were surprised by a vivid vision of something previously invisible. For instance,

*[T]he world in a sense opened up. The gaps were filled in. Like you can see more details of this fictional world through this exercise.”; “It made me feel like the world that we were thinking about became more complete”; “I’m usually a very pessimistic person (...) but then all these images of self-sustainability and smaller, you know, communities and solidarity (...) came up.*

The impact of meditation on design and futures thinking practices is largely unexplored. Nevertheless, I hope that these findings can inspire other practitioners to experiment with meditation-inspired approaches to broaden our understanding of how to support individuals to think beyond commonly told narratives and imagine radically different and more desirable futures, thereby creating the seedbeds for sustainable change.



**Figure 1.** Meditation-inspired visioning exercise employing breath, sound, and storytelling. *Source: author.*

Nobody "works" because they have to but everyone receives a universal basic income, which allows them to focus on what really interests them, for example studying. Places of education are informal, where courses can be taken at will, with no academic pressure/certifications/grades required or mandated. The community becomes more connected to and respectful of nature, seeing it as a vital resource for themselves and the world.



**Figure 2.** Participant's description and visualisation of a vision as experienced during the exercise. *Source: author.*

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## Bio

**Rike Neuhoff** is a PhD student at Aalborg University in Denmark. Her research explores how participatory design approaches can be combined with futuring approaches to support a democratic transformation towards circular cities.