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## Entering the Inconceivable: Stereogramic Viewing and the Spirit of the Mountain Cave

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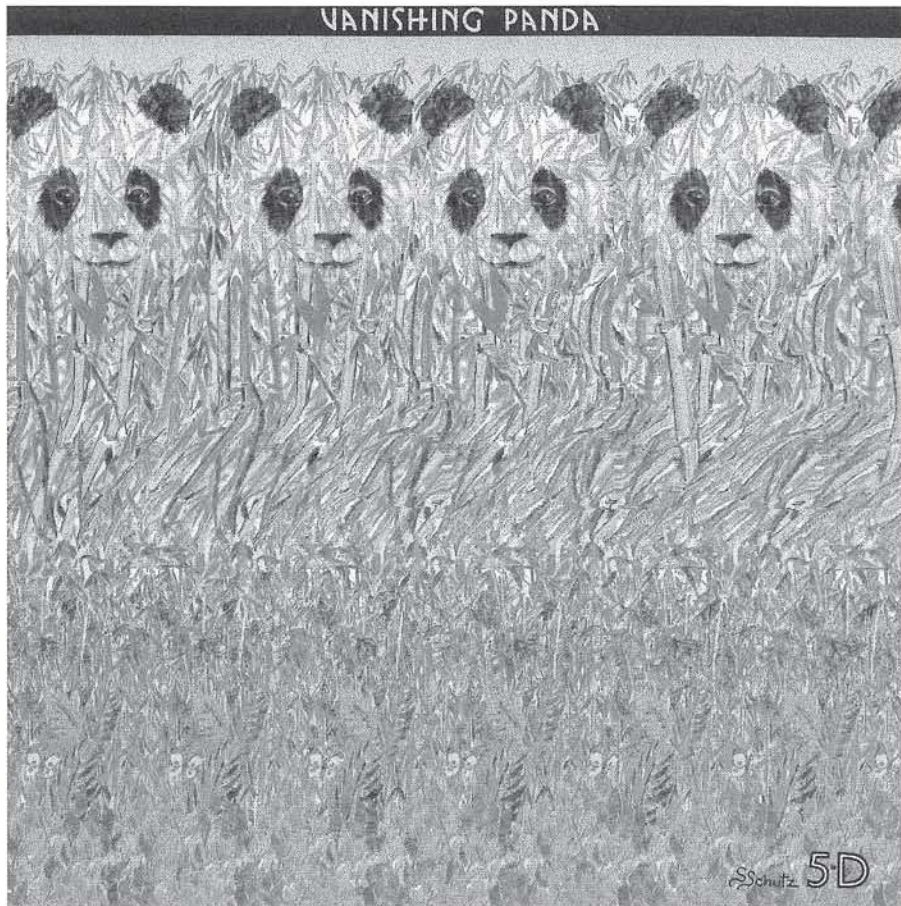
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# Entering the Inconceivable

## Stereographic Viewing and the Spirit of the Mountain Cave

*The garden bamboos  
Reveal  
The wind's invisible form:  
Movement of shadows  
In the moonlight.<sup>1</sup>*

*A monk asked, "What about it when the dust  
is wiped away and the Buddha is seen?"  
The master said, "It is not that the dust has not been  
wiped away, but that the Buddha is impossible to see."<sup>2</sup>*



Stereogram by Stephen Schultz

"Vanishing Panda," created by Stephen Schultz, Ph.D. Copyright © 1994 by SPS Studio, Inc. All rights reserved.  
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THE SEARCH to evoke three-dimensional depth on a plane surface has long played an important role in the history of art and photography. “‘Stereogram’ is the generic term for two-dimensional images that, when viewed in the right way, appear to be three dimensional.”<sup>3</sup> Since the 1960s, stereography has advanced dramatically with the development of random dot stereograms by Bela Julesz; the single-picture stereogram by Christopher Tyler; repeating pattern and color field stereograms and other such creations; the influx of artists drawn to the medium; and the role of sophisticated computer programs.<sup>4</sup>

My involvement with stereograms began in the fall of 1994, when a student gave me a thank-you card—the front of which was a captivating 3-D scene called “Vanishing Panda.”<sup>5</sup> The foreground was a lush green forest with violet and yellow butterflies; the middle part was a forest of bamboo trees; and the top part contained the faces of four smiling panda bears. The entire scene looked two-dimensional to me, but the back of the card provided the following instructions:

Hold the art close to your nose so that it appears blurry. Relax and stare at it. Make believe you are looking “through” the art, slowly move it away from your face until an image “pops out” and becomes perfectly clear. The time it takes to see the image can vary, so don’t get discouraged!

I tried again and again for a month to see the alleged 3-D image emerge, experimenting with a variety of viewing techniques: all to no avail. Discouraged, I finally gave up.

A year later I was sitting in my dentist’s waiting room. Next to me was a six-year-old girl waiting for her mother and gleefully preoccupied with flipping through a book of stereograms. She would look at each picture for a few moments, smile, and move on—obviously delighted by the embedded 3-D images she was able to see. I couldn’t resist asking her the secret of her success. “Oh, you just look, but don’t look,” she said. When I got home I immediately retrieved the panda picture and tried out my young informant’s advice. After a few moments the embedded 3-D picture suddenly leaped into vivid focus. The experience was sudden and compelling. I would characterize it as having entered the inconceivable.

Books on stereograms sometimes also allude to transpersonal themes:

The appearance of a 3-D figure hidden in the random-dot stereograms had a distinct effect on my consciousness. It reminded me that the way the world looks is the way I learned to see it and that there are other ways of seeing the world, other dimensions right before our eyes...looking at the illustrations in this book is a kind of meditative practice.<sup>6</sup>

Indeed, one of the pleasures that the color field stereograms provide is an altered state of awareness, similar to those sometimes produced by psychedelic drugs or religious experiences.<sup>7</sup>

...the painstaking effort required to wrest the three-dimensional image from the random-dot stereogram is a kind of ritual, a form of meditation that allows you to transcend the reality of daily life.<sup>8</sup>

We would add, one cannot succeed in seeing stereograms by a willful act of concentration: a relaxed, receptive gaze, an attitude of nonforceful action or effortless effort is necessary. One has to give up trying to see and just see. In this regard, the

most illuminating parallel between stereographic viewing and transpersonal perception is the experience so often reported by stereogram viewers of suddenly seeing something that was there all along but heretofore “impossible” to see. The experience of suddenly and vividly *being there, seeing what was there all along, entering the inconceivable*, recalls a frequent transpersonal refrain:

A monk asked, “What about when the True Realm of  
Reality has no dust upon it?”  
The master said, “Everything is right here.”<sup>9</sup>

That moment is like taking a hood off your head.  
What boundless spaciousness and relief!  
This is the supreme seeing:  
seeing what was not seen before.<sup>10</sup>

Do not think  
The moon appears when the clouds are gone.  
All the time it has been there in the sky  
So perfectly clear.<sup>11</sup>

I was born with a divine jewel,  
Long since filmed with dust.  
This morning, wiped clean, it mirrors  
Streams and mountains, without end.<sup>12</sup>

Why should I seek?  
I am the same as he.  
His essence speaks through me.  
I have been looking for myself.<sup>13</sup>

Ever desireless, one can see the mystery.  
Ever desiring, one can see the manifestations.<sup>14</sup>

We have drawn special attention to stereographic viewing as a potent metaphorical analogue for transpersonal realization. But can a playful perceptual pastime like viewing stereograms provide a transpersonal *destination*? Sometimes the way in is the way out:

During the eighth century Wu Tao-tzu (d. 792) completed his last masterpiece for the royal court. It was a landscape painted on a wall of the court. Wu Tao-tzu worked patiently on it in solitude and kept the work draped until it was completed and the Emperor arrived for its unveiling. Wu Tao-tzu drew aside the coverings and the Emperor gazed at the vast and awesome scene and its magnificent detail: woods, mountains, limitless expanses of sky, speckled with clouds and birds, and even men in the hills. “Look,” said the artist pointing, “here dwells a spirit in a mountain cave.” He clapped his hands and the gate of the cave immediately flew open. The artist stepped in, turned, and said, “The inside is even more beautiful. It is beyond words. Let me lead the way!” But before the Emperor could follow or even bring himself to speak, the gate, the artist, the painting and all faded away. Before him remained only the blank wall with no trace of any brush marks.<sup>15</sup>

Entering the inconceivable: the heart of transpersonalism?



## Notes

1. Shigematsu, S., Ed. & Trans., 1988, *A Zen harvest: Japanese folk Zen sayings*. New York: Weatherhill, p. 139.
2. Green, J., 1998, *The recorded sayings of Zen Master Joshu* [Chao-chou ch'an shih yü lu]. Boston: Shambhala, p. 109.
3. Cadence Books, 1994, *Stereogram*. San Francisco: Author, p. 10.
4. See reference in note 3 and Cadence Books, 1994, *Superstereogram*. San Francisco: Author. Both volumes provide a variety of stereograms to view as well as historical material.
5. Personal anecdotes relate to the first author.
6. Howard Rheingold, in Cadence Books, 1994, p. 9; see note 3 above.
7. In Cadence Books, 1994, p. 50; see note 3 above.
8. In Cadence Books, 1994, p. 74; see note 3 above.
9. Joshu, in Green, 1998, p. 86; see note 2 above.
10. Dudjom Rinpoche, in R. A. F. Thurman, Ed. & Trans., 1994, *The Tibetan book of the dead: Liberation through understanding in the between*. New York: Bantam Books, p. 159.
11. Shibayama, Z., 1974, *Zen comments on the Mumonkan*. New York: Harper & Row, p. 71.
12. Ikuzanchu, in L. Stryk, T. Ikemoto, & T. Takayama, Trans., 1973, *Zen poems of China and India: The crane's bill*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, p. 7.
13. Rumi, in M. Baugh, 1996, [Review of the book *Rumi: One-handed basket weaving*]. *San Francisco Jung Institute Library Journal*, 15(3), 35-49, p. 44.
14. Lao Tsu, in G.-F. Feng & J. English, Trans., 1972, *Lao Tsu: Tao Te Ching*. New York: Knopf, unpaginated, section 1.
15. Chang, C.-Y., 1970, *Creativity and Taoism: A study of Chinese philosophy, art, and poetry*. New York: Harper & Row, p. 95.

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