

Visualization for Change

2nd Edition



*Using the Creative Power
of Your Imagination for Self-Improvement,
Therapy, Healing & Pleasure*

ATRICK FANNING

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PATRICK FANNING



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Introduction

Dear Friend,

Thank you for picking up my book. This is the second edition of a book I wrote originally in 1987, and I'd like to tell you about it.

Back in 1987 I was having a busy, stressful, but wonderful time. My best friend and business partner Matthew McKay and I had published our first five self-help books, and our company, New Harbinger Publications, was starting to make enough money to actually support us.

My wife, Nancy, had spent six months of the year before in bed, pregnant and in constant danger of miscarriage. But our son, Michael, had been born big and healthy, with no complications. Nancy was fully recovered and had gone back to work half-time as a nurse. We were living in an old house in Berkeley, California, and fixing it up as time and money allowed. Our life was full and happy.

I had written three books with Matt and other collaborators, but I'd never done one all on my own. I wanted to do a book on visualization, all by myself. I converted a corner of the attic of our old house to an office space, replaced my trusty Kaypro CPM machine with one of those new-fangled IBM clones from Taiwan, and I was ready to write.

At that time, Shakti Gawain's *Creative Visualization* had been a steady best-seller for eight or nine years. First published by a tiny company in northern California, it had been picked up by a big New York publishing house as a mass market paperback. It had sold well over a million copies by then.

Shakti's book was far and away the most popular book on visualization, and deservedly so. It was short, simple, warm, personal, positive, and inspiring. The "New Age" was in full swing, and *Creative Visualization* was one of its sacred texts.

Nevertheless, I had my own ideas about visualization as a very powerful tool for personal growth, healing, and positive change. But was there room for another book on visualization, published by yet another tiny company in northern California? I figured that I would "position" my book as the scientific, rational, thinking person's guide to visualization. I'd put in lots of historical background, cite lots of scientific studies, and back up everything I said with facts and real-life examples. My book would be a toolbox, chock full of useful exercises and practical tips. It would be a lot less mystical and "New Age" than Shakti's book. I wouldn't try to explain the universe—just cover the more down-to-earth applications of visualization for therapy, healing, and self-improvement. I'd sell a million copies and get rich.

Well, *Visualization for Change* got written, and I was very proud of it. I worked hard, did my homework, and produced the best book I could. But it didn't sell millions. It sold about 50,000 copies—a successful, profitable book, but not a best-seller.

Now it's seven years later. I've reread my book and I've reread Shakti's book. I see why hers sold millions and mine sold thousands. She was writing from her heart and I was writing from my head. Her book explained the universe and mine was a toolbox. Hers inspired its readers, while mine merely informed them.

Faced with updating *Visualization for Change*, I first thought I would just bring the literature citations and the history section up to date, add a couple of new techniques I had worked out, and let it go at that. But when I reread the book, I realized how much I had changed in seven short years.

Since the first edition of this book, I have moved to the country. I now work only half-time at book writing and publishing. The rest of the time I spend with my friends and family. We had a barn raising. We have a big garden and chickens and sheep. Nancy and I have time to spend together. Life is still full and busy, but less frantic. I'm not trying to sell millions of books and get rich now.

I have returned to painting watercolors, a love of my youth. I have learned to fly a plane. Both enterprises have given me a broader, looser concept of visualization than I had seven years ago when this book first came out.

I formed a men's group when I moved to the country, and Matt McKay and I wrote a book called *Being a Man* that shifted how I think about men in particular and people in general. Spiritual questions occupy me more now. I pay

more attention to my dreams. I am more interested in understanding and accepting what is, and less interested in changing things for change's sake.

My son, Michael, is eight now. When I tuck him in most nights I make up a "stupid ghost story" to tell him. I've been doing this for four or five years now. It's taught me a lot about how creativity waxes and wanes, how imagination can surprise and delight.

When I reread the first edition of *Visualization for Change*, I realized that I no longer feel that I have to prove how good a scientist I am. These days I don't have such a compulsion to be objective and to keep my personal opinions and stories out of the text. I no longer have to prove that I can write a real, adult book, all by myself. I don't worry about not having a Ph.D. any more. I'm more secure in my self.

These changes in me have found their way into this second edition in the form of more personal examples, more opinions, more enthusiasm, and a greater trust in the scope and power of visualization. I'm especially pleased with the new chapter on visualization for pleasure, because in this brief life it's important to take time to have fun.

And yet, it's still a toolbox. All the practical, step-by-step instructions remain. I still believe that change is important and that visualization is a skill that anyone can learn to perform better.

I hope you like this incarnation of my visualization book. I hope you find it practical, helpful, and inspiring. I wish you success in making the changes you want in your life.

Most of all, enjoy yourself.


Patrick Fanning
Graton, California, 1994

I

Visualization Primer

1

What Is Visualization for Change?

"The greatest discovery of my generation is that human beings, by changing the inner attitudes of their minds, can change the outer aspects of their lives."

—William James

Visualization is a powerful tool for changing your life. Five minutes of visualization can cancel out hours, days, even weeks of negative thinking or acting. Three five-minute sessions a day can change a habit that took years to form and reinforce.

Everybody visualizes. You visualize whenever you daydream, remember a past experience, or think of someone you know. It's a natural, largely automatic activity like breathing or walking. This book teaches you how to improve your existing powers of visualization so that you can harness this automatic activity and use it consciously to help keep yourself sane, fit, healthy, and happy.

You probably have a lot of questions about visualization: What is it exactly? Is it like dreaming or meditation or hypnosis? Is it a mystical or religious kind of experience? How do you do it? Is it difficult? What can it be used for?

This chapter will answer the most common questions about visualization, and explain how to get the most out of this book.

A Definition

In this book, visualization is defined as *the conscious, volitional creation of mental sense impressions for the purpose of changing yourself*.

Almost every word in this definition is important for understanding exactly what I mean, and don't mean, by visualization.

The word "conscious" sets visualization apart from dreams, which occur in an unconscious state. Many people who study visualization are also interested in dreams and dream interpretation, and indeed there do seem to be some real connections between visualization and dreaming. But since this book focuses on the really important *skills* that you can learn, I've omitted any in-depth discussion of dreams.

"Volitional" means that you choose the time, place, purpose, and general content of your visualization. This aspect distinguishes visualization from hallucinations or visions. The visualization skills you will learn in this book work without having to take drugs or believe in any particular religious or mystical system.

"Creation" means that the process is creative. Your visualizations will often be fantastic or impossible. This sets visualization apart from normal perception or cognition, which is, hopefully, based in reality. Work on a problem using visualization is very different from just thinking about it.

"Mental sense impressions" reminds you that visualization is not all visual. Besides mental pictures, you will also create mental sounds, tastes, smells, sensations of temperature, texture, and so on. The visual component is usually the strongest, but all the senses must be brought into play to get the most from visualization. It's unfortunate that terms such as "visualization" and "imagery" and "imagination" stress the visual aspects of the process. But no other satisfactory term seems to exist in English, so you just have to keep in mind that "visualization" includes the use of all the senses.

"For the purpose of changing" is included because this book is about visualization *for change*. It doesn't deal with visualization used solely for entertainment, for relieving boredom, for generating pure insight, for exploring past lives, for communicating with the dead, for recovering lost memories and objects, for enhancing mystical experiences, or as part of the study of psychic phenomena. These endeavors are omitted not because they are unworthy of consideration, but because they are usually not concerned with the kind of changes covered in this book: self-improvement, therapy, healing, and pain control.

"Yourself" means that this book doesn't have much to say about using visualization to change *others*. Many people have pointed out the similarities between visualization and some of the techniques employed by shamans or witch doctors in primitive societies. These healers often visualize an imaginary journey for the purpose of healing their patients. The subject of the shamanistic healing of others

is interesting, but beyond the scope of this book. You will learn to “change” others only by changing yourself and how you interact with people.

Types of Visualization for Change

Receptive Visualization

Receptive visualization is listening to your unconscious. In its purest form, you just close your eyes, relax, and wait to see what comes into your mind. You might set a minimal scene first, or ask a question and wait for the answer.

This kind of visualization is good for exploring your resistance to some change in your life, for uncovering your true feelings when you’re ambivalent, for unearthing your personal images or symbols of change, or for clarifying what you really want to do when faced with several confusing alternatives. The information that comes up during receptive visualization is sometimes vague, like dream images. It often requires some interpretation before the meaning becomes clear.

Jennifer was a pediatrician just finished with her residency. She didn’t know whether to look for a secure job on the staff of a big hospital or to join a private practice being started by someone she knew in school. Jennifer lay down on the couch one day and closed her eyes, with the intention of just clearing her mind and letting her true desires surface. She saw herself in a fog, and heard twittering noises like birds. She drifted forward and two buildings came into sight: a gray concrete structure and a cute little cottage. The cottage seemed welcoming and the concrete building seemed cold. At this point she opened her eyes and realized that the warmer, more personal environment of the private practice was more important to her than the security and excitement of a big hospital.

Programmed Visualization

If receptive visualization is listening to your unconscious, programmed visualization is talking to it. You create what you want to see and hear and feel in great detail and manipulate it according to a predetermined script. You stay in conscious control.

Programmed visualization is good for achieving goals, improving athletic performance, speeding up the healing of injuries, and intensifying images in general.

Bill was a carpenter who broke his leg on the job. While he was laid up, he used visualization to speed the healing of his leg. He would spend several minutes each day visualizing his leg bone as a splintered piece of wood. He saw himself straightening out the wood, pressing the jagged edges into place, spreading glue on the break, and clamping splints around it. He would make himself very small and go inside the bone, plastering over microscopic cracks as though he were fixing an old plaster wall. He saw the cells of his leg bone knitting together like the frame of a house being built. In this way he used very detailed, familiar images of construction and repair to enhance the natural healing process.

Bill was back on the job a full two weeks before his doctor had predicted he might be.

Guided Visualization

Guided visualization is actually a combination of receptive and programmed visualization. You set a scene in detail, with certain crucial elements left out, and then let your subconscious fill them in.

Most visualization is of the guided variety. In fact, it's nearly impossible to create a visualization that is purely receptive or totally programmed. Your rational mind is likely to add conscious detail to the former, while your unconscious mind tends to toss unexpected images into the latter.

Marilyn's visualization about weight loss is a good example of how planned and unplanned elements make up a guided visualization. As part of her campaign to lose forty pounds, Marilyn practiced seeing herself having fun in the future in her slim new body. One time she was visualizing herself dancing at her older sister's wedding, which was coming up in six months. She concentrated on hearing the music, feeling her handsome partner's arms around her, seeing the swirling lights, and feeling happy and attractive—all as planned. Then she "zoomed back" from the scene to get a look at her slimmer self, and was surprised to find that she was not only slimmer, but shorter. She looked like a midget. This surprised her and she snapped out of the scene.

Later she decided to explore the scene by re-creating it in detail. She asked her shorter self what had happened and received the reply, "I've lost so much weight, I'm disappearing." This unplanned, unsought-for information made Marilyn realize that one reason she had been overweight for so long was that it made her feel "substantial" in the world. Her weight made people notice her. Marilyn used this realization to reprogram her vision of the future to include a full-sized, substantial, noticeable Marilyn who happened to be thinner. She did start losing weight, and danced at her sister's wedding in a two-sizes-smaller dress.

The Possible Changes

Visualization as taught in this book is good for self-improvement, therapy, healing, and pain control.

Self-improvement covers a lot of ground. On the one hand, it involves getting control of or getting rid of negative aspects of your life such as smoking and overeating. On the other hand, self-improvement means acquiring or increasing positive aspects of your life by fostering creativity, solving problems, achieving goals, improving study habits, and excelling at sports.

Therapeutic change runs the gamut from reducing stress, bolstering self-esteem, and conquering insomnia to relieving painful emotions such as depression, anxiety, anger, and shyness.

Visualization techniques for healing and pain control work for a wide range of injuries, diseases, infections, and immune system disorders.

How To Use This Book

Read the next chapter on rules for effective visualization carefully. It contains the information you need to get started. You should refer back to the rules from time to time to refresh your memory and get ideas for improving your visualizations.

Do the exercises in chapters three, four, five, and six. They contain the basic skills that you must practice to become skilled at visualization.

Remember, this is a skills book. The whole purpose is to teach the skill of visualization for change. If you just read through without doing any of the exercises, you're wasting your time. You might as well toss this book into the garbage right now.

If you have trouble doing the exercises, but sincerely want to learn visualization, try using this book with someone else—a therapist, doctor, advisor, friend, or with those in a support group. Get the help you need to stick with the exercises. Set up agreements or contracts for how many times you will practice each day or week.

Once you have mastered the fundamental skills in chapters three, four, five, and six, skim ahead to the applications that interest you. But don't skip all the other chapters entirely. Each application chapter contains examples and insights that may apply to the topic of another chapter. You may find that a method of intensifying images used for controlling asthma is just what you need to sharpen your vision of the perfect tennis game.

The last section of the book begins with a chapter on the history and theory of visualization. You don't need to study history and theory to use visualization effectively—it's a largely intuitive, "right-brain" activity that you learn by doing. But reading about history and theory is interesting, and it can give your rational, "left-brain" side something to chew on while your more creative "right brain" is busy learning how to visualize.

See the last chapter if you want to try prerecorded or homemade cassette tapes, video tapes, visualizing while listening to music, visualizing with a partner, and so on. There you'll also find suggestions for further reading in the bibliography.

Putting Visualization in Perspective

Visualization for change is a powerful skill that works in harmony with other agents for change in your life. It augments and enhances everything you do, but it doesn't *replace* anything. Having bought this book, you cannot now fire your doctor, stop therapy, quit your job, drop out of school, and stop eating a balanced diet, confident that you will henceforth prosper by mind power alone.

It doesn't work that way. Visualization can ease the pain of a serious sinus infection and maximize your body's natural defenses—but antibiotics are still the treatment of choice. Likewise, you can imagine yourself breezing through a job interview, and it will probably help relax you—but success is more likely if you

also practice your self-presentation with a friend, bone up on relevant facts you'll need to know, and talk about your fears with a professional counselor.

If you feel seriously sick, see your doctor. If you feel seriously disturbed, see a therapist. You owe it to yourself to muster all the help available.