



Prana

Your luminous meditation assistant

Design by Gijs Spierings

Text by Pieter Desmet

An idea for a new design can arise in the most unexpected places. Like on top of a mountain. In 2017, design student Gijs Spierings made a hiking trip in the Annapurna mountain range of the Nepalese Himalayas. In this grandiose setting, he came across a man who enthusiastically told him about the meditation retreat he had recently attended. Just two weeks later, Gijs visited a Vipassana retreat centre himself, in Yangon, Myanmar. No phone, no music, no snacks, no talking - just silence. For ten days. Here he learned the power of meditation. Observing your own thoughts, emotions and sensations, without judgment or attachment. It was an eye-opening experience. Although Gijs had not foreseen it at the time, this experience turned out to be a catalyst for the research that, four years later, would lead to his design of Prana: light as a supporting medium for meditation.

The Dark Side of Meditation

In the years following his retreat, Gijs developed a deep appreciation for the practice of meditation, due to the positive effects it had on his overall well-being. And he is not the only one, of course. Meditation in its many guises has been practiced for thousands of years. Whereas previously it was primarily practiced in Eastern countries, meditation is now firmly anchored in Western society. Research confirms the powerful effects of regular meditation, such as reduced anxiety and stress, alleviating depression, improving sleep and memory, and lowering blood pressure (Sharma, 2015). However, recent research has also revealed some of the more darker sides of meditation. For example, meditation may also lead to negative emotions and even an increase in stress, especially in novice practitioners (Schlosser et al., 2019). Common complaints include anxiety when failing to form and maintain meditation habits, frustration from slow progress, and disappointment from the lack of noticeable results. Gijs shared these experiences. He struggled at first to find a form of meditation that suited him and he experimented with many different meditation apps. In the years after his first introduction, he eventually developed a routine that worked for him. Motivated by this personal quest, he decided to explore how, as a designer, he could create something that offers a helping hand to those who practice meditation.



Creative Session With Meditation Practitioners



Light Experiments

Designing With Light

Gijs set himself the goal of supporting meditation with the help of light. One source of inspiration was the American artist James Turrell. Turrell has gained global fame with his fascinating light installations. The often sculptural and geometric shapes he uses create a sense of depth and distort our perspective. His work is sometimes described as a meditative experience. If you are interested in experiencing one of his works for yourself: one of Turrell's Skyscapes can be admired in the Voorlinden museum in Wassenaar. In order to incorporate light into his design, Gijs developed several prototypes by means of a simple yet effective test device. Using this device, he performed hundreds of experiments with the effects of light colours, dynamics, and patterns. He also conducted research with a diverse group of meditation practitioners.

Gijs' project crystallised into a light installation that supports three phases of meditation, each with their own light effects:

(1) Getting into the right state of mind

Light creates an atmosphere that helps one feel at ease. This supports a tranquil start to the meditation session. You are guided into a relaxed state, both mentally and physically, thus preparing for the meditation. Furthermore, the light motivates you in a subtle way to not forget that you're practicing meditation.

(2) Supporting the focus

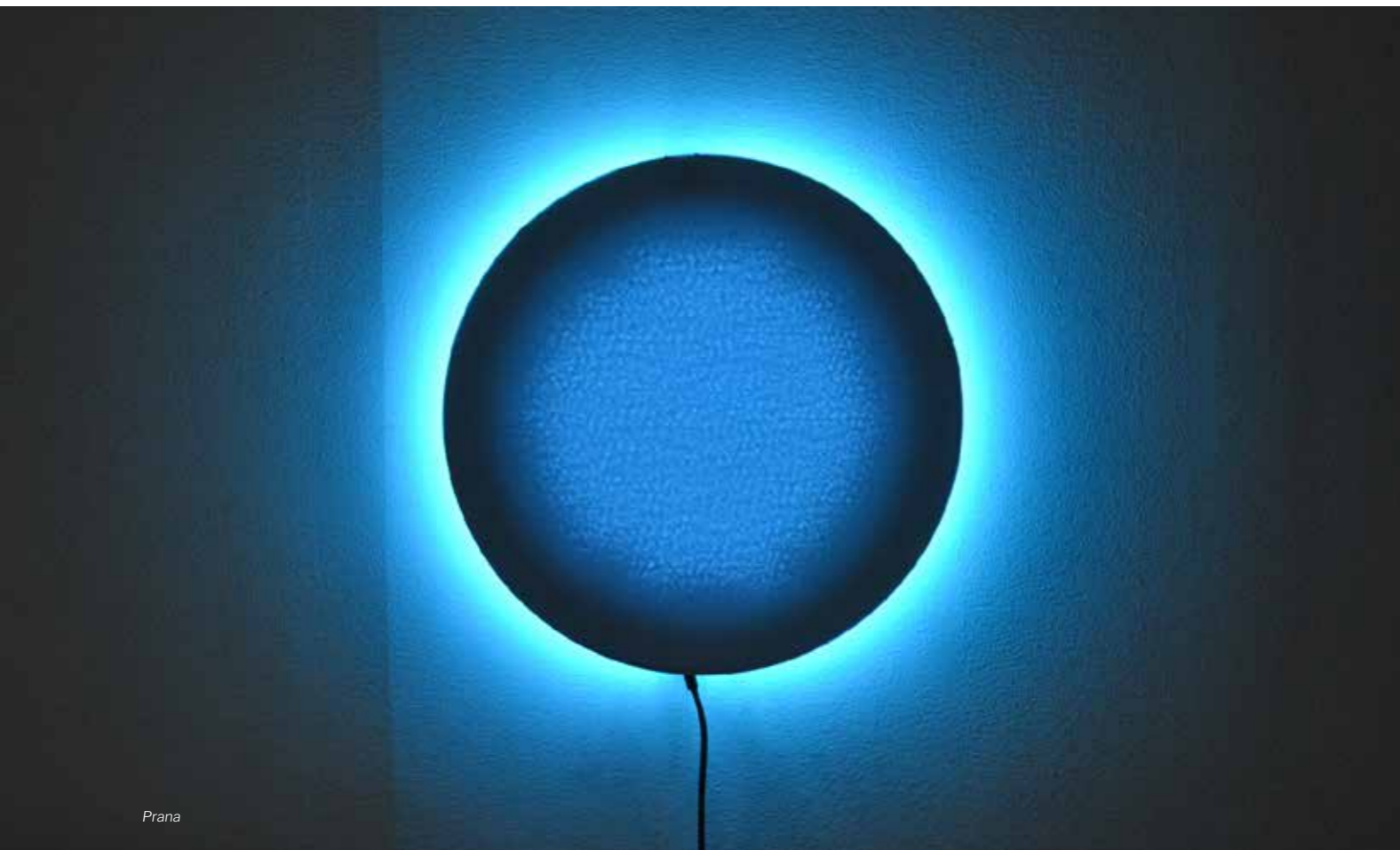
During meditation, light helps you maintain focus. A subtle hint of light makes you realise you are getting distracted, which helps to regain focus. This reduces the chances of getting lost in your train of thought, and makes you aware of the mind starting to drift.

(3) Transition to everyday life

Light guides you back to everyday life in a calm way. To prevent you from quickly falling back into day-to-day thoughts and emotions, the meditation session concludes with a transitional moment.

Light As a Natural Experience

When Gijs told me about his idea for his design project, I was quite sceptical. I believe there is something fundamentally wrong with the relationship between meditation and technology. But when I saw Prana in action, I was immediately sold. It is actually almost impossible to describe in words, you simply have to experience it yourself. Prana is enchanting. It immerses the room in a tranquil atmosphere and creates magical patterns and aesthetic lighting effects - all without making you feel like you're looking at a device. It is similar to experiencing a natural phenomenon, such as a sunset or the northern lights. Prana helps you without being overly explicit or overbearing. I see Prana as an expression of love. After all, love is an "intense feeling of deep affection" or a "great interest and pleasure in something", and Gijs has achieved both with his design: he has combined a deep affection for the user of his design with a great pleasure in the research and design process. Prana is difficult to describe with just photos. If you want to get a proper impression, take a look at the video (https://youtu.be/QuHX_0N0h24).



The final design was named Prana (Spierings, 2021). Prana is a Sanskrit term meaning life force, energy, or vitality. Prana is also used to refer to breath. Every physical breath brings about a corresponding movement of Prana throughout the body. Gijs' Prana is an interactive wall lamp. It can be best described as a meditation assistant that communicates using light. The lamp acts as a personal guide during your journey through meditation.



Gijs Spierings (photo) developed Prana in 2021 as part of a self-initiated graduation project for the *Design for Interaction* master's degree. His supervisors were Sylvia Pont and Pieter Desmet (TU Delft). Gijs is currently working with a start-up (called Glimp) developing a device to support the mental well-being of first responders. He is also an independent entrepreneur with a focus on lighting design and graphic design. His plan is to continue to develop Prana in the future.

Colophon

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Faculty of Industrial Design Engineering

Delft University of Technology

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Product concept & design by Gijs Spierings

Text by Pieter Desmet

Cover photograph by Gijs Spierings

All other images by Gijs Spierings

Graphic design by Tessa Arnold

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Reference

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