



FEELSY WHITE PAPER

The Science of Visual Meditation

Why watching, touching and hearing calm works — and how Feelsy engineers it into minutes.

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Foreword

I am writing the last lines of this paper at 3:56 on a Monday morning, after more than twelve hours of intercontinental flights and a full day of work. I mention this not as a badge of honour but as a confession: I am a highly energetic person, and I have spent most of my adult life searching for the opposite of what comes naturally to me. Calm. Slowness. The ability to actually be inside a moment instead of sprinting past it.

That search has taken me around the world. For twenty years I have lived as something close to a nomad, through more than fifteen cities across Africa, the Middle East, South America, Asia and the United States. I have been fortunate to experience wellbeing in almost every form humans package it: world-class retreat facilities and luxury spas, yes, but also tiny shops in northern Africa where a stranger with strong hands and no appointment book understands more about tension than most textbooks. I have explored Ayurveda at its source, meditation in most of its variations, and I have read more books than I probably should have on Stoicism, breathing, Eastern medicine, and everything the self-help shelf has to offer.

Everywhere I went, I found the same thing wearing different clothes: every culture, on every continent, has built its own technology for clarity. A ritual, a room, a rhythm, a practice. The packaging changes. The intent does not.

I should be honest about what I am not. I did not study medicine. I did not formally study psychology. This paper is not a clinical document, and it does not pretend to be one. It is the synthesis of two decades of first-hand experience and all the research I could get my hands on, checked against the published science wherever the science exists. There is evidence in these pages. There is also soul. I believe a paper about calm needs both.

I should also be honest about how Feelsy entered my life: I did not found it. In 2025, Feelsy came under our care, and we have been building on top of its original founders' work ever since. What drew me to it was recognition. In an app about slime, of all things, I saw the thing I had been looking for across four continents: something action-oriented, something you can touch, an entry point to calm that meets people where they actually are, phone in hand, mind racing. Not another voice telling you to sit still and empty your mind. ASMR and textures combine the essence of meditation with the intensity of feeling something, right now, with your senses. The original team planted that seed; our job has been to help it grow. And the road here, for me personally, came through hardship, learning experiences and more trial and error

than I can remember, not through enlightenment.

My hope for Feelsy is simple and, I admit, ambitious: to balance the world a little. Less frustration, less stress, less anxiety. More connection with each other, more enjoyment of life, and more enjoyment of ourselves.

Thank you for reading, for your contributions, and, to the many Feelsy users around the world, for your continued support and feedback. We keep improving.

— *Joaquin Díaz Gutierrez, CEO, Newry*

Executive Summary

This paper makes one central argument: for a mind in overdrive, resting attention on slow, satisfying sensory experience is one of the most reliable and lowest-effort paths to a calmer nervous system, and modern screens, so often the cause of overstimulation, can be redesigned to deliver exactly that experience.

We call this practice visual meditation: resting attention on slow, continuous, aesthetically pleasing motion, and letting perception, rather than willpower, quiet the mind. It is not a replacement for classical meditation; it is an entrance to the same building through a door that more people can actually walk through.

The argument rests on three bodies of evidence, reviewed in Part II. First, ASMR research shows that gentle audio-visual stimulation produces measurable physiological calming: in laboratory conditions, people who experience ASMR show reduced heart rate (an average reduction of 3.41 beats per minute in the landmark study) alongside increased positive affect (Poerio et al., 2018). Second, attention restoration theory shows that softly fascinating stimuli, the kind that hold the eye without demanding anything, replenish depleted attention (Kaplan, 1995; Ohly et al., 2016). Third, slow-paced breathing reliably shifts the autonomic nervous system toward its parasympathetic, rest-and-digest mode (Zaccaro et al., 2018), and brief app-delivered practice measurably reduces stress in randomised trials (Flett et al., 2019; Economides et al., 2018).

Part III travels the world through the traditions that anticipated all of this by centuries: from *trataka* candle-gazing and mandala practice to Zen *zazen*, from *pranayama* to the hammam, from forest bathing to the Nordic love of outdoor life. Part IV describes how Feelsy translates both the science and the traditions into product decisions, and the ethical commitments that govern that translation. Part V looks ahead.

Feelsy is a wellness product, not a medical device. Nothing in this paper is medical advice.

Part I — The Attention Crisis

1.1 The most contested resource of our time

Attention has become the most contested resource of the digital economy. The average adult now spends a large share of waking life looking at screens, and the majority of the products competing for that time are engineered to accelerate attention: to interrupt, to reward unpredictably, to make stopping harder than continuing. The result is a population that describes itself, in survey after survey, as stressed, under-slept and unable to focus.

The numbers describe a species renegotiating its relationship with attention. The typical adult internet user now spends six hours and thirty-eight minutes online every day, roughly forty per cent of waking life (DataReportal, Digital 2025 Global Overview, based on GWI data). Worldwide, thirty-seven per cent of adults report having experienced a lot of stress on the previous day (Gallup Global Emotions Report, 2024). And in the United States, about one adult in three does not get the sleep they need on a regular basis (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, sleep surveillance data). Screens did not cause all of this. But they are where much of it happens, and where much of it could be undone.

1.2 The wrong answer and the honest one

The conventional prescription is abstinence: put the phone down, delete the apps, go outside. It is good advice that most people cannot follow most of the time, because the phone is where their evenings, commutes and in-between moments actually happen. Advice that requires people to be different people is not advice; it is judgement.

The honest answer is to change what the screen serves. If attention lives on the screen, then the screen is precisely where restoration should be delivered. The question this paper answers is what kind of stimulation restores rather than depletes, and how we know.

Part II — What the Science Says

2.1 Defining visual meditation

Visual meditation is the practice of resting attention on slow, continuous, aesthetically pleasing motion, letting perception do the work of calming the body. Where classical meditation asks a beginner to generate stillness from nothing, visual meditation offers the mind something soft to hold: a fold of slime, a drifting orb, a blooming kaleidoscope, a droplet resting above still water.

Its active ingredients, drawn from the evidence reviewed below, are: motion at or below the pace of resting breath; high sensory congruence (what you see, hear and feel agree with each other); zero task demand (nothing to win, complete or optimise); and interactivity on the user's terms (touch is available but never required).

2.2 ASMR: the measurable tingles

Autonomous sensory meridian response (ASMR) entered the peer-reviewed literature in 2015, when Barratt and Davis defined it as a tingling, static-like sensation across the scalp and back of the neck, triggered by specific gentle audio and visual stimuli and widely accompanied by relaxation and wellbeing (Barratt & Davis, 2015, PeerJ). Their survey of 475 ASMR experiencers mapped the trigger landscape: whispering (75 per cent), personal attention (69 per cent), crisp sounds (64 per cent) and, most relevant to this paper, slow movements (53 per cent) and watching repetitive tasks (34 per cent). The last two are visual triggers, and they describe almost exactly what a person does when they watch slime being folded. The same survey measured why people keep coming back: 98 per cent of ASMR experiencers use the videos to relax, 82 per cent to help them fall asleep and 70 per cent to manage stress, and 80 per cent report a positive effect on mood, with the largest improvements among respondents scoring in the moderate-to-severe range for depression (Barratt & Davis, 2015).

Three years later, Poerio and colleagues gave the field its physiological foundation. In two studies (an online experiment with 1,002 participants and a laboratory study with 110), ASMR videos increased pleasant affect only in people who experience ASMR, and in the lab produced a distinctive signature: heart rate fell by an average of 3.41 beats per minute ($d = 0.39$) while skin conductance rose ($d = 0.17$), a blend of deep calming and gentle positive arousal that the authors compared to the profile of other complex emotional experiences (Poerio et al., 2018, PLOS ONE). For context, the authors noted this cardiac deceleration is

comparable in magnitude to effects reported for established stress-reduction techniques in similar laboratory settings.

Neuroimaging work locates the experience in the brain's reward and emotional-arousal circuitry: ASMR episodes activate the nucleus accumbens, dorsal anterior cingulate cortex and insula (Lochte et al., 2018, BioImpacts), and ASMR experiencers show atypical resting-state connectivity in default-mode, salience and sensorimotor networks (Smith, Fredborg & Kornelsen, 2019, Brain Connectivity). These are pilot-scale samples, and the field is young; but the direction of evidence is consistent: for the people who feel it, ASMR is a real, measurable state, not a placebo of internet culture. Survey respondents also self-report temporary relief from symptoms of low mood and chronic pain (Barratt & Davis, 2015), a finding that awaits clinical-grade study.

Comparative work suggests specificity: ASMR content outperforms matched neutral video for state relaxation in experiencers (Cash, Heisick & Papesh, 2022, PLOS ONE), and laboratory studies have replicated mood improvement and cardiac deceleration in young adults (Smejka & Wiggs, 2022).

2.3 Soft fascination: attention that restores

In 1995, environmental psychologist Stephen Kaplan formalised a distinction that every tired mind knows intuitively: directed attention, the effortful kind spent on spreadsheets and inboxes, is a depletable resource; and what restores it is not silence or sleep alone but a different mode of attention entirely, effortless, curious, gently held by the environment. Kaplan called the restorative quality of such stimuli soft fascination, and the framework Attention Restoration Theory (Kaplan, 1995, Journal of Environmental Psychology).

A systematic review of the experimental literature found measurable restoration of attentional performance following exposure to natural environments (Ohly et al., 2016), and the classic experiments in the tradition, from Ulrich's hospital-window study (Ulrich, 1984, Science) to Berman's nature-walk experiments (Berman, Jonides & Kaplan, 2008, Psychological Science), repeatedly find that even mediated nature, pictures and videos rather than the real thing, produces a fraction of the benefit. That last detail matters enormously for this paper: restoration does not require the forest. It requires the qualities the forest happens to have: slow change, soft complexity, safety, and no demands.

A well-designed texture loop is, in Kaplan's vocabulary, an engineered patch of soft fascination: complex enough to hold the eye, gentle enough to ask nothing of it.

2.4 The breath: the body's own dial

Slow-paced breathing, below roughly ten breaths per minute, is the most direct lever a person has on their own autonomic state. The systematic review by Zaccaro and colleagues found that slow breathing techniques reliably increase heart-rate variability and parasympathetic activity, and correlate with reduced anxiety and arousal across the experimental literature (Zaccaro et al., 2018, *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience*). The 4-7-8 pattern that Feelsy teaches, inhale four counts, hold seven, exhale eight, is a modern packaging (popularised by Dr Andrew Weil) of pranayama principles that are thousands of years old; its long exhale is precisely the manoeuvre the slow-breathing literature identifies as vagally active.

2.5 The hands: touch as regulation

Humans regulate themselves with their hands. We knead bread, tell rosaries, turn worry beads, pet animals, run fingers through sand. The scientific literature on tactile self-regulation is younger and messier than the breathing literature, but converging lines support what every culture already practises: repetitive, low-stakes manual activity occupies the sensorimotor system in a way that displaces rumination. The gardening literature is the strongest formal evidence base: a meta-analysis found significant improvements in depression, anxiety and stress outcomes associated with horticultural activity (Soga, Gaston & Yamaura, 2017, *Preventive Medicine Reports*).

I come to this section with a personal bias I should declare: I am a passionate plant grower. I feel comfort in doing things with my bare hands, and in most cases I refuse gardening gloves, because touching the soil is the point. Water, roots, earth. Whoever coined the expression touch some grass was joking; the joke works because the instruction is real.

Feelsy's interactive textures are a digital descendant of this lineage: the finger drags, the surface answers, the loop between hand and eye closes. Touch is offered, never demanded; the autoplay mode exists precisely because some moments call for watching only.

2.6 Sound and sleep

For the sleepless, sound is one of the oldest remedies and one of the most studied. The systematic review by Riedy and colleagues found that continuous, spectrally stable noise can shorten sleep onset and mask disruptive environmental sound for many listeners, while noting honestly that evidence quality varies across studies (Riedy et al., 2020, *Sleep Medicine Reviews*). This mixed-but-promising picture is why Feelsy ships sound as a mixing desk rather

than a single switch: white noise, ambient scenes, narrated sleepcasts, and ASMR layers the user can blend to their own bedroom and their own brain.

2.7 Minutes that move the needle

Does any of this work in app form, in the real world, in the small doses real people actually take? The randomised evidence says yes, modestly and meaningfully. Ten to twenty minutes a day of app-based mindfulness for ten days improved stress, affect and irritability against active controls (Economides et al., 2018, Mindfulness); a randomised trial of popular mindfulness apps in students found improvements in depressive symptoms and college adjustment (Flett et al., 2019, Mindfulness). Self-monitoring matters too: engagement with a mood-tracking app predicted increases in emotional self-awareness, which in turn predicted improvements in mental health (Bakker & Rickard, 2018, Journal of Affective Disorders). Notice, name, then act: the loop Feelsy's mood diary and Companion are built on.

Part III — A World Tour of Calm

3.0 Why traditions matter

Everything in Part II was measured in the last forty years. Almost none of it would surprise the people I have met in twenty years of travelling. The monk in Asia, the hammam attendant in North Africa, the Ayurvedic practitioner who looked at my schedule with polite horror: each of them belongs to a tradition that solved pieces of this puzzle centuries before anyone owned an oscilloscope. This part of the paper walks through those traditions with respect, and with an eye for the common machinery underneath.

3.1 The visual lineage: trataka, mandala, kasina

Visual meditation is not a modern invention; it is the oldest branch of the family. In the Hatha Yoga tradition, trataka is the practice of steady gazing, classically at a candle flame, until the eyes water, followed by visualising the flame at the point between the eyebrows. In Tibetan and Hindu practice, the mandala and yantra serve as geometric objects of contemplation: the eye travels a symmetrical, centred design and the mind organises itself around the journey. In the Theravada tradition, the kasina practices of the Visuddhimagga direct sustained attention to a simple visual object, a disc of earth, of colour, of light, as a gateway to concentrated absorption. Three cultures, three centuries-old instructions, one insight: the gaze is a handle on the mind. Feelsy's kaleidoscope textures are direct descendants of the mandala; its autoplay loops, of the flame.

3.2 Zen: just sitting

Zazen, seated Zen meditation, and especially the Soto school's shikantaza, just sitting, represents the tradition's most radical simplicity: no mantra, no visualisation, no goal, only open, upright presence. What the tradition understood, and what beginners discover the hard way, is that just sitting is an advanced practice precisely because it removes every handle. Visual meditation, in this light, is honest about being a beginner's door: it offers the handle that shikantaza deliberately removes, so that a mind not yet ready to sit with nothing can begin by sitting with something soft. The Zen garden, raked gravel contemplated from a veranda, is the tradition's own concession to the same truth.

3.3 Vipassana and the art of noticing

Vipassana, insight meditation in the Theravada lineage, trains continuous, non-judgemental noticing of present experience: breath, sensation, the arising and passing of phenomena. Its modern secular descendant is most of what the West calls mindfulness. Feelsy borrows its deepest principle, that noticing precedes change, in the mood diary and the Companion's check-ins: name what is here, gently, before doing anything about it.

3.4 Pranayama, Ayurveda and the daily rhythm

I explored Ayurveda where it was born, and what struck me was not the herbs or the oils but the architecture of the day: dinacharya, the daily rhythm, treats routine itself as medicine. Wake, cleanse, move, breathe, eat, rest, in an order tuned to the body rather than the calendar app. Pranayama, the yogic science of breath, sits inside that architecture as its portable engine: extend the exhale and the day slows down with it. Feelsy's built-in 4-7-8 exercise is this tradition, made tappable; and the modern slow-breathing research reviewed in section 2.4 is, in essence, science confirming what pranayama practitioners have known for millennia.

3.5 Yoga Nidra: the sleep of the yogis

Yoga Nidra guides a practitioner, lying down, through a systematic rotation of attention around the body into a state on the border of sleep: conscious, profoundly rested, asking nothing. It may be the tradition most perfectly suited to modern exhaustion, because its central permission is radical: you do not have to sit up, try, or even stay awake. Feelsy's sleepcasts and guided wind-downs are built on its template.

3.6 The Taoist stream: qigong and effortless effort

Chinese tradition contributes the concept the whole field needs most: wu wei, effortless action. Qigong and Taoist breathing cultivate calm not by confrontation with the mind but by slow, repeated, flowing movement synchronised with breath, effort so smooth it stops feeling like effort. Watching a texture flow, breathing with it, touching it without goal: this is wu wei with a touchscreen.

3.7 Japan: the forest, the flaw and the bowl of tea

Japan industrialised earlier and harder than most of Asia, and responded by formalising antidotes. Shinrin-yoku, forest bathing, was named by the Japanese Forest Agency in 1982 and has since accumulated a genuine physiological evidence base: field experiments across

dozens of forest sites found lower cortisol, lower pulse rate and higher parasympathetic activity in forest versus city settings (Park et al., 2010, Environmental Health and Preventive Medicine; reviewed in Hansen et al., 2017). Wabi-sabi, the aesthetic of imperfection and transience, teaches the eye to rest on the cracked, the weathered and the incomplete without needing to fix it. And the tea ceremony choreographs an hour of attention around the slow preparation of a single bowl: moving meditation disguised as hospitality. All three lessons are load-bearing in Feelsy's design: mediated nature works; imperfect, organic motion soothes more than geometric perfection; and ritual, a known sequence with a known end, is itself a calming technology.

3.8 The hammam: heat, water, surrender

Of everything I have experienced, from world-famous spas to that small shop in northern Africa, the hammam taught me the most about what bodies need. Heat, steam, water, unhurried scrubbing by hands that have done this ten thousand times, and, crucially, the surrender of control. You do not optimise a hammam. You submit to its sequence, and somewhere between the hot room and the cold rinse, the argument you were having with your life dissolves. The lesson for a digital product is humility: an app cannot pour water over anyone. What it can do is borrow the hammam's deeper mechanism, a fixed, trusted sequence that asks nothing except that you stay in it.

3.9 The North: cold air and warm light

The Nordic countries contribute a pair of complementary technologies. Friluftsliv, open-air life, is the Norwegian conviction that time outdoors in any weather is not recreation but maintenance. Hygge, its Danish indoor counterpart, is the deliberate engineering of warmth, low light, soft textures and small company into an atmosphere of safety. Between them they map the two halves of Feelsy's palette: the living, natural motion of the textures, and the dark, warm, low-stimulation environment they live in.

3.10 What the traditions share

Across every latitude the machinery repeats: a rhythm slower than daily life; a sensory anchor (flame, breath, steam, gravel, tea); a ritual sequence with a beginning and an end; permission to stop striving; and, almost always, a role for the hands. Modernity did not invent calm, and it cannot improve on these principles. What it can do, what Feelsy tries to do, is make them available in the ninety seconds between a difficult email and the next meeting.

Part IV — Engineering Calm: The Feelsy Translation

4.1 From principle to pixel

Every Feelsy design decision traces to a principle from Part II or Part III. Motion is capped at breathing pace (soft fascination; wu wei). Every texture is sound-matched in studio detail (ASMR congruence). Touch is available but optional (tactile regulation; the hammam's surrender). Sessions have an end (ritual; the tea ceremony). The palette is dark, warm and low-arousal (hygge). The 4-7-8 exercise animates the interface as a visual metronome (pranayama; Zaccaro et al., 2018). The mood diary asks before it suggests (vipassana's noticing; Bakker & Rickard, 2018).

4.2 The 80+ textures as a library of calm

The texture library is curated the way a botanical garden is: for variety of species, not volume. Slimes for viscous, yielding motion; fluids for flow and caustics; orbs and particles for depth and drift; kaleidoscopes for the mandala lineage; DIY tools for the maker's calm of the potting bench. Each is designed, animated and sound-matched by hand, then tuned with player feedback until it feels inevitable.

4.3 The Companion: a permission-first presence

Feelsy's AI Companion is built on a script of restraint. It notices patterns, a three-day mood streak, a restless night, and checks in softly, in short sentences, without jargon. It always asks before suggesting a micro-action. It remembers what has calmed you before. And it knows its limits: confronted with language suggesting crisis, it steps out of character immediately, points to professional resources, and makes the exit obvious. An AI in a wellness product must be a guest in the user's nervous system, never a landlord.

4.4 What we refuse to build

No infinite feeds. No engagement streaks that punish rest. No dark patterns at the paywall. No notification designed to interrupt rather than invite. The business model is subscription because subscription aligns our incentive with the user leaving each session calmer, not with the session never ending.

Part V — Notes from a Nomad (A Personal Essay)

People assume a wellness founder must be a naturally calm person. I am the opposite, and I suspect that is the more useful qualification. Calm people do not need to reverse-engineer calm. The rest of us do.

Twenty years, fifteen cities, four continents. I have watched the sun rise over three different oceans in the same month and called it a schedule. The energy that makes that life possible is a gift with a bill attached: a mind that does not idle. My search for the off-switch was never a lifestyle choice. It was survival, and it went through hardship, and learning experiences, and more trial and error than I can remember.

What travel gave me was not an answer but a dataset. In every place, I looked for where the locals went to slow down, and I went there too. The luxury retreats taught me what money buys: silence, space, and staff. The small shops taught me what money cannot buy and does not need to: the transaction there is attention for attention. You show up, you surrender the next hour, and someone whose craft is older than your country works the tension out of you. Both experiences end in the same place. The nervous system does not check the price tag.

Somewhere between the books on Stoicism and the mornings of Ayurveda, between meditation retreats and the plants I grow with my bare hands because gloves would defeat the purpose, I noticed my own pattern: I do not relax by subtracting stimulation. I relax by replacing it. Give my restless attention something slow, rich and pointless, soil to work, water to pour, a texture to fold, and the noise drains out on its own. The traditions have known this forever. The science, as Part II shows, is catching up. The apps, mostly, have not: they keep telling people like me to close our eyes and think of nothing, which is like telling an insomniac to simply sleep.

Feelsy is the closest thing I have found to an answer to that gap, which is why, when the chance came in 2025 to take Feelsy under our wing, we took it and went to work. Action-oriented calm. Meditation you enter through your senses, not through your discipline. It will not replace the hammam, the forest or the garden, and it should not try. It is for the other twenty-three hours: the commute, the airport gate, the 3am hotel room where I am finishing this paper. If it helps balance the world even a little, less frustration, less anxiety, more

presence, more connection, more enjoyment of life and of ourselves, it will have been worth every one of the errors it took to build.

Part VI — The Road Ahead

Calm should meet the body where it is. From Q3 2026, Feelsy will integrate with wearables and sleep hardware, OURA, WHOOP and leading smart beds, using readiness and sleep signals to select the evening's texture, soundscape and wind-down before the user has to choose. Beyond that, our research agenda includes partnering with academic groups to study visual meditation directly: session-level effects on self-reported stress, and, with biometric partners, on measured recovery. We intend to publish what we find, including the null results.

We also intend to keep listening. If you are a researcher, sound designer, meditation teacher or slime artist who takes softness seriously, write to contributors@feelsy.life.

Glossary

ASMR: autonomous sensory meridian response; a pleasant tingling, deeply relaxing sensation triggered by gentle audio-visual stimuli. · Soft fascination: effortless attention held by gently interesting stimuli, the restorative mode identified by Attention Restoration Theory. · Parasympathetic nervous system: the rest-and-digest branch of the autonomic nervous system. · HRV: heart-rate variability, a marker of autonomic flexibility. · Pranayama: yogic breath regulation. · Trataka: yogic steady-gazing practice. · Kasina: Theravada visual concentration object. · Shikantaza: just sitting, objectless Zen meditation. · Shinrin-yoku: Japanese forest bathing. · Wabi-sabi: the Japanese aesthetic of imperfection and impermanence. · Wu wei: Taoist effortless action. · Dinacharya: the Ayurvedic daily routine. · Hygge / friluftsliv: Danish indoor cosiness / Norwegian open-air life.

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