Imaginal Practice: Doorways and Directions (Part 2)

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Recapping very briefly some of what we've talked about so far: I mentioned the remarkable range of directions, flavors, and conceptual frameworks that support the use of imagination in Dharma practice, other traditions, and psychotherapeutic approaches. Given this range, when one practices with images and explores even a little, one comes to see that what's most interesting and significant about imaginal practice is actually the conceptual framework we bring to bear—the framework we create to support imaginal practice. This is what directs it in one direction or another, what opens it up, what gives it depth and amplifies it. So it's actually the conceptual framework, rather than the images themselves, that proves most interesting and significant.

There's a range of conceptual frameworks available, and I want to emphasize that it's up to you how much of this material you take, where you land with conceptual frameworks. It's really up to you how much and how you use images in your practice. Having said that, I also shared some of my deeper aims for this retreat, wanting to be open about that.

We talked briefly about the cultural history that, over millennia, has given rise to the dominant view in our culture—the view that most people share about reality and, by extension, about imagination and images, what place they have and what place they don't have. Some of this may sound academic, but it's important because those events, those decisions, these debates that happened filter down and become the common view over time. That's what we inherit, what we walk around in, what saturates and permeates our consciousness. It's quite difficult to move out of that, to even realize the force it has and the limitations it places on consciousness, on experience, and on our sense of existence.

Some are not okay with that dominant view. They feel its limitations, or they intuit or consciously recognize the limitations and the fact that it's not necessarily a final truth. They recognize the possibility, feel a calling, perhaps recognize the necessity of opening something up further with regard to imagination and its use—because of what it does with regard to the sense of self and the range of self-experience, the range of self-view and self-sense, and how much that's perhaps needed in these times. Also because of what it opens up in the range of experience and the range of what we sense as beautiful and holy. That whole range of what we regard as beautiful, holy, divine—sometimes people feel this already wanting to expand. They feel that expansion, that calling, that necessity.

With all that, what I'm perhaps most interested in, even above and beyond the use of imagination, is: can

we expand our felt sense, our felt perception of the range of sacredness, of what is sacred to us? Can our felt sense of the sacred expand beyond either not existing at all, or beyond a quite narrow limitation somehow given to us by the culture? And through that, with that, is there a possibility for us to re-enchant the cosmos? The cosmos we've inherited from modernist thinking is a very flat cosmos of materiality. Is there a place for the skillful use of imagination that actually opens up something, deepens something, enriches something in our very sense of existence and the world, the cosmos that we live in?

I want to say more now about some of what we'll be exploring in terms of directions in this retreat, and also the kind of conceptions that run alongside the practice, supporting practice. Some of what I'm going to talk about tonight probably won't make complete sense—that's okay. We're throwing it out there as a signpost of where we're going, and also to plant a seed. You might think, "Oh yes, that's a piece I want to understand." So if you get to the end of the retreat and listen to this introductory talk again, you'll say, "Oh yes, that piece and that piece."

Given this cultural history and what is really the dominant view in our society regarding imagination, we're attempting to revalidate—to give validity and importance again to imagination, or certain kinds of imagination, certain kinds of use of imagination. We want to open space and place for imagination that's actually wider and probably more far-reaching than some of the ways it's used in typical psychotherapeutic approaches these days. To open space, place, respect, and validity for that which is wider and more far-reaching than it has so far.

We want to actually reintroduce or revalidate the idea of some uses of imagination as ways of knowing. This is something quite subtle and profound. We tend to think: when I have knowledge of something, I know I'm looking at a table. How do I know that's true? Well, I can kick it. I can ask a hundred other people. If ninety-nine people agree it's a table, that's good enough. Then I know something—I know something that's real. Perhaps I can measure it. Such factors give us a sense of knowing. But what about imagination?

That's not a way of knowing. But what is it? This question we referred to before—epistemology, how do we know anything? What is knowledge? What does knowing mean? That needs to be opened up for us. It's quite subtle and quite profound.

So is there a kind of knowing that's different than the commonly agreed upon meaning and range of what knowing is? If something is just me that sees this image, can I open up my idea of what knowing means to give more respect to imagination in some cases, in some usages, so it forms an avenue as a way of knowing?

To do that, to open up that space and place for some uses of imagination as a way of knowing, we need to map out and differentiate all the different kinds of image that arise—the aspects of imagination, the levels of imagination, the directions, all of that. What is, for example, just the flotsam and jetsam of the mind? What is just daydreaming? What is memory and the coloring of memory through image and fantasy?

What is what's called ESP, extrasensory perception? What's archetypal image? What is the whole range that falls into mystical experiences that are possible in terms of perception of self, other, world? And what is this opening—Corbin uses this phrase, the mundus imaginalis in Latin, which literally means the world of the imagination? We can say the imaginal realm, the realm of the imaginal.

So differentiating, mapping out all that and all the nuances, all the subtleties of all that. To do that, to open up space and validity for imagination as a way of knowing, and to place all that in a larger coordinated philosophy and psychology that does explore this question of reality and opens up the exploration of reality—is it just yes or no, it is real or it's not real? Are there more subtle shades philosophically, ways we can open up that whole question of what's called ontology, the study of what's real? And as I said as well, the study of epistemology. All this needs opening up, to place it in that philosophy which includes ontology, epistemology, cosmology—the sense of the cosmos. That would be a huge task, absolutely huge task to revalidate it, to bring it in as a way of knowing, to give it respect, to map it out, to differentiate, to coordinate a much larger, more open philosophy.

So I actually don't know anyone after the scientific revolution who has even attempted to do that. I mean, it could be I just don't know them. I'm not aware. There have been certain people like Goethe, the poet, the German poet, and Coleridge, also a poet. Jung, of course. Owen Barfield, the English philosopher of the twentieth century. Apparently Rudolf Steiner—I don't know any of his works, I'm not sure, I heard indirectly. Ed Casey, the philosopher, American philosopher. Richard Tarnas, a little bit, sort of cultural philosopher. All these, in their way, have added a little to this quest.

And in Tibet, Mipham Rinpoche, a great, great sage of the Nyingma tradition in Tibet, I think in 1908 or 1912 or something like that—very beautiful and sophisticated philosophy bringing emptiness and Tantra together and the whole question of reality and levels of reality. I'm not sure how much by that time the sort of scientific revolution had reached Tibet or how much that was integrated in his thought.

There have been people who have done this, and I wonder now, and I wonder for this course and this retreat—can we add a little? That means you and me in our explorations and discussions. Perhaps we can add even a little bit, if that's not too grandiose an idea, to this movement and expansion and opening and exploration. You and I, together, talking, sharing our experiences. Is it possible that we can add to this opening movement?

Now, one thing that's perhaps necessary, or at least what is possible, is that we can elbow more room, more space, and more respect for skillful and nuanced, sophisticated use of the imagination, so that it's less immediately dismissed, so that at least there's a larger willingness to admit that maybe imagination is important for us. Maybe that it needs including in our psychology, in our sense and view of what the self is and our self as an experience, in our philosophy, in our worldview, in our whole idea about so-called reality.

So elbowing a little more room to include that and, as I said, to give it some respect as a way or really ways

of knowing—different forms of imagination as ways of knowing, involved as particular ways of knowing.

One way we can do that is by actually turning around and exposing, questioning, critiquing the assumptions of the dominant culture, what I call the modernist metaphysics, that are, as I said, usually often hidden, not even fully conscious, and very rarely questioned. We can expose, question, and critique those assumptions that run almost in our blood, in the blood of our minds these days.

We can do that without reverting to a kind of simplistic primitivism, trying to go back to the Stone Age sort of thinking or some other culture from centuries and millennia ago, without reverting also to a kind of naive religious fundamentalism or naive New Age fundamentalism.

I've myself spoken and written just a little bit about this in different places with respect to nature, with respect to the self, with respect to the Dharma and other things, coming at it from different directions—either through Dharma understandings of emptiness, deep Dharma understandings of emptiness, or through more recent openings in Western philosophy, post-modernism, post-structuralism, that sort of stuff, even some of the openings from modern physics of the last hundred years or so. All of which I and I know other people find fascinating, really fascinating to explore, and actually it's very important, very important to bring a more sophisticated philosophy in, I feel.

And what's interesting to me, what's very interesting to me, is some people need that to kind of legitimize for themselves imaginal practice, to open the doors for them. They need this kind of elbowing of space, creating more space philosophically.

And some people don't need it at all. They're not even particularly interested in it. This itself is quite fascinating—why some people require this kind of philosophical foundation while others don't.

On this retreat, I'm actually not going to delve too deeply into all that philosophical territory. What I want to emphasize is practice—really getting into the actual work, certainly with some conceptual framework, but not so much a critique of dominant views as an opening up of other possibilities conceptually. I want to really emphasize the practice and see what that opens for us in terms of our experience, and then in terms of our understanding.

So regarding practice and what we'll be doing, I want to make clear what this is not. This is not Gestalt psychology, psychosynthesis, focusing, drama therapy, psychodrama, art therapy, voice dialogue work, or chöd—if you know that Tibetan practice. You may feel, and indeed there are some common aspects in terms of techniques with those modalities and ways of working.

But what I'm emphasizing here is differentiated primarily from those approaches by a different kind of conceptual framework—regarding images and imagination, regarding the self (including emptiness), and regarding cosmology: our sense of how we're looking at and conceiving and perceiving the world, the cosmos itself.

So while there might be some aspects in common, this work is actually differentiated significantly by the different conceptual framework underlying it.

As I mentioned before, I'm interested in the more usual conceptual frameworks regarding images and all those healing modalities I mentioned earlier. But I'm also, if you like, more interested in what we could call more radical conceptual frameworks.

Let me highlight three areas of this right now.

The first concerns the self. We touched on this earlier, but what would it be to really include a thorough sense of the emptiness of self? And then, within that or with that, to really expand the sense of self—not in some kind of expanding oneness, but in plurality. To expand the range of self, not to integrate what we see in imaginal characters or subordinate them to some central sense of self, but actually to expand radically, together with a view of emptiness. And to turn something around in our relationship to imaginal figures—what are sometimes called daimons—and our relationship with them, and the sense sometimes of what they're asking of us.

Instead of these figures serving the self and serving the so-called growth of the self or the journey of the self to awakening or enlightenment or full potential—all very valid—what is it to turn that around in terms of the direction of service?

The second aspect, which I've mentioned before, is the realization—the dawning—that fantasy, image, mythos is already permeating our lives. It's already functioning, already there. And this is not a bad thing. The word "fantasy" has very bad press, certainly in the Dharma world for the most part. But what is it to realize that it's already operating, already there in our lives, and that this is not problematic? We just need to recognize it.

And it's already operating in relation to our sense and conception and vision and very feeling of what the Dharma is for us. When we realize this pervasion of fantasy, image, mythos in our lives—that it also pervades our sense of the Dharma—this does something to our very sense of the Dharma eventually. It puts it on different ground. What then does the Dharma become? Is there another way of conceiving the Dharma given that realization?

The third aspect involves what I call cosmopoiesis—C-O-S-M-O-P-O-E-S-I-S. I'm going to talk much more about this as the retreat unfolds. But this really has to do with using the imagination to open up the very sense and perception of the world we live in, including the material world—very much including matter itself. Through imagination we realize that in a way—poiesis means creating, like poetry, like making poetry—there's an art to that perception and a malleability to the perception of the cosmos.

All three of these—regarding the self, regarding the pervasion of fantasy and what it means for the Dharma, and regarding this cosmopoiesis, this sense of the cosmos—all of this includes the importance and nourishment of a sense of soulfulness. That's another concept I'm going to explain more fully as we

go. But I'm talking about meaningfulness, resonance, depth. These qualities are part of soulfulness for us.

We can also speak of soul-making. Again, I'll return to this in much more detail. This is very much part of the conceptual framework I want to emphasize over these days. This taking care of the soul through feeding and nourishing, giving attention to a sense of soulfulness—this soul-making—either will open up the sense of imagination as a way of knowing, or it already requires a kind of

entering into a trust of the imagination as a way of knowing. These two aspects are intimately related to each other.

Let me briefly fill out what we're exploring here. One aspect of the conceptual framework I want to open is our understanding of the self. Is it possible, through the use of imagination in different ways, to expand both the notion and the sense—the actual lived experience—of self and other? When I say self, I don't mean just myself, but the selves of others as well. We're expanding the entire notion and sense of self and other.

Through this expansion, we come to feel and know the self as more than merely a result of neurological or genetic causes or accidents. It's perfectly fine to view the self that way—it's one mode of viewing, one mode of seeing the self. But is it possible to expand the whole notion of self way beyond that? Beyond seeing the self as simply a result of past conditioning in terms of family, culture, education, and so forth. Beyond too the view of self that is quite popular in the Dharma these days—that the self is just a process, that all there is is process.

Certainly beyond all that, but beyond too any kind of concretized or tight identification of the self with anything—any image or self-view or belief. Can we, through the use of imagination, expand the very sense, the very notion and view of self and other beyond all these limitations? We can include all that at times, certainly, but we're moving toward something radically beyond all that.

Part of what helps is a Dharma understanding that the self—this self, other selves—is empty, totally and thoroughly empty. This means much more in Dharma language than to say that the self is a process of the aggregates in time, a process of psychophysical constituents. To say that it's empty totally is to say something much more thorough and profound than that.

Realizing too that because the self is thoroughly empty, the perception of the self and the sense of the self is malleable. It's something that we can shape through and with the imagination. It's thoroughly empty, deeply empty, and it's malleable, this sense.

But going beyond even this—is it possible to expand the notion of the self, the sense of the self, way beyond the typical humanistic notions of self and personhood? As I mentioned, in Western culture, modern Western culture, and also in Dharma culture, there's a kind of poverty we have regarding notions and attitudes to personality and personhood. It's quite strange and in some ways self-contradictory. There's a kind of flatness there. We flatten personality a little bit, and in a way we flatten the possibilities

for a sense of meaningfulness regarding the self and regarding the selves of others.

One of the ways of really opening that up in beautiful directions is through the imagination. Through this, what's quite interesting is that there can be a place again—we open up the possibility for re-including perhaps even a sense of divinity. That's another word I'm going to explore and expand on more as the retreat goes on. But is there a place for divinity in the self, through the self—this self and the selves of others? Can I open up that experience?

The kind of divinity I'm talking about right now is divinity in and through the personality. This is different because it's particular. It's particular to this being or that being, or the face that this being or that being is showing right now through my perception, through my imagination. It's particular. It's different from a kind of divinity that is simply homogenous, like "all is one"—everyone is part of the same oneness, the same one divine substance or whatever you want to call it that pervades the universe. That's beautiful, but I'm talking about something different now. It's not just universal; it's very particular and personal as well.

Again, we're going to get much more into this. But with that, there is also, as I mentioned before, a possibility for the whole sense of what is divine or holy to be stretched, to expand, so that we can allow a wider range. We can actually see and feel and sense a wider range of what is included in what divinity looks like and how it expresses. There are other gods, if you like—if we put it that way—apart from the ones that we are educated to see as divine, as holy, as sacred.

All of this is part of the second aspect of the more radical conceptual framework I mentioned before—part of a sense of expansion of the Dharma and our sense of what the Dharma is. This is quite interesting, even the word "expansion" itself.

How am I going to relate to this? Are we stretching and expanding the Dharma? Is that what we're doing here? Is that what the movement's going on? Are we fudging it and kind of saying, well, this is what the Buddha said anyway, this is what he meant. I'm not expanding anything, I'm just being historically accurate. Are we radically undermining the Dharma, perhaps? Are we regrounding it? So how even are we imagining that we're conceiving the relation of all this to the Dharma? Again, something I'll come back to later on in the retreat. These are big, delicate and subtle, complex as well, streams of what we want to get into.

Included in that, in terms of opening up of the Dharma and extending our sense of the Dharma, is that we're also extending or altering, for some people, our conception of the Four Noble Truths. What's so central to Dharma practice is teaching of suffering and ending, or at least reducing suffering. And instead using that teaching around suffering, instead of as a sort of teaching that in shorthand says something like, try and live a life of non-clinging. Instead of that, we want to include something, a different conception of what the Four Noble Truths are, rather seeing them as keys, or rather that teaching itself as a key that we can use to examine perception, meaning examine appearances, examine experiences, and see how that opens up.

It invites a way of exploring perception which reveals the emptiness of perception, the emptiness of appearance, the malleability of appearances and experiences. And through that, we're widening the range of possible ways of looking, widening the range of ways that we can perceive and experience and therefore live. So we're not locked into a Dharma view or attitude or attempt to live seeing everything as a process or trying to be in the now or just be mindful or something as if that's kind of the Dharma way or that everything's impermanent, which seems so obvious. And trying not to cling. Trying even to see everything as one. It's quite popular.

So we're widening the whole range of perception and possibility of perception, possibility of experience, through an investigation of perception. And that's a different way of understanding what the Four Noble Truths are.

Again, we'll return to this, and something else we'll return to too, I'll mention it now, is regarding this sense of the cosmos or experience of the cosmos, is it possible that that expands, that our sense of the world we live in expands, and instead of being just a world of flat materiality, devoid of meaning, devoid of deeper echoes and what I would call a vertical dimension. That's another theme I'm going to come back to, another concept I'm going to come back to, that the sense of the cosmos, if you like, is enriched and a vertical dimension is allowed through the imagination, through the conceptual framework, because the typical modernist view is a flat, one-dimensional, material cosmos. We'll come back to that.

So there's a few things here, just to summarize. We're recognizing that image, fantasy, mythos permeates our lives. This is key. We recognize that we see, we experience a lot of the time through image, through fantasy, through mythos. We think also through image, through fantasy, through mythos, and we love through image, fantasy, mythos. So we see, think, and love through image already, through imagination already, recognizing that. That's huge.

And this beginning to recognize, too, an aspect of our experience, a dimension of our experience, which I'm going to call the soulfulness, this aspect of meaningfulness, of depth, of resonance, of kinds of beauty, and much more, and really beginning to include that, to take care of it, to nourish the soulfulness. And through that is a kind of extension of the range of how we see the self. An extension of the range of what we consider beautiful, what we feel beautiful, what we feel is meaningful. Giving place to more and more.

And also this idea of giving back a validity to the imagination or certain uses of the imagination as ways of knowing, everything that's involved in that. And through that to re-enchant the perception of the self, of other, of cosmos, to perhaps open up a sense of or an allowing for a sense of divinity there. And what I'm going to call the vertical dimension. So expanding the range of the sacred. And through all this, perhaps, probably opening up and maybe even changing the relationship with what we consider dharma.

So I'm not, as I mentioned, talking about chöd on this retreat. I'm not actually teaching tantra in the way that it's usually thought of, though there is much overlap in the kind of things that we'll be talking about. And I will talk about tantra a little bit and the connections, etc., a little bit.

But given what I've said so far, it's really asking, we're really asking for open-mindedness in the way that you approach this material and also in the way we listen. And listening is quite an interesting avenue of experience. Sometimes we listen and we listen to something and say, oh, I already know this. It's the same as something I already know. And we kind of put it neatly in a box of something where oh yes it's psychosynthesis, oh yes he's talking about focusing. So oftentimes we listen for the similarities and we kind of shrink something that's maybe quite new or different and shrink it into a box that we already know. We actually miss what's new and different and potentially stretching or challenging. So is it possible, as you're listening over the days, to listen in fact deliberately for the differences.

Listen for what's new and what's different from what you already know, and the boxes that you might already have regarding imagination. We tend to listen in a way that affirms what we already know, rather than challenges us or opens up our frameworks. So open-mindedness and openness of listening is probably really necessary on this retreat.

I'd like to say a little bit more about this in regards to the Dharma and how we conceive of and relate to it. It would be very understandable if someone listening has a kind of loose conception of the Dharma—maybe I haven't really articulated it clearly. A loose conception of the Dharma might involve something like this: The Dharma says, try to always be present, because this is it. This life is it. This moment is it. There's nothing else. This is what's real, and we don't want to miss it. So you want to be present to it.

In addition, this popular conception might say: try not to cling. Try to let go, because everything's impermanent—which seems obvious. You can't hold on to it. And it might also add: try to be kind. That might be too simplistic—perhaps a little unkind putting it that way—but that's kind of the conception we might have of the Dharma. Try to always be present because this is it, try not to cling, try to let go because everything is impermanent, try to be kind, try to be nice.

Some people might have a conception of the Dharma that's a little more influenced by streams such as the Advaita tradition. The kind of goal—if you like; I might not use the language of goal—is to somehow always be in a sense that all is one. Everything is one. Or to always be in a kind of sense of no-self. There's no self. The self is not arising or is non-existent. These are two quite common, very loose conceptions of what Dharma is that are quite popular these days.

But what if we contrast that with a different conception that I would like to introduce and fill out a little bit? Those injunctions or perceptions—to see everything as all-is-one, or to see and feel there's no self, to be present, to not cling—all these are rather modes. They're modes of perception, what I call ways of looking, temporary options. In other words, one can go in and out. There's great flexibility of perception, of the way of looking.

So I can go into this way of looking and see all-is-one, can go into that and see different ways that the self is empty, can go into non-clinging in different ways. They're all modes of perception—modes, temporary

options of ways of looking. There's flexibility there.

What Dharma is, is the practice of this flexibility: practicing a range, a whole range of types of awareness, sensitivity—modes of awareness or sensitivity, different modes of awareness, modes of sensitivity, again, what I call ways of looking. The multiplicity of perception, a really large range of perception and experience, is available to us as human beings that we can actually sense. It's not an intellectual concept. We can actually perceive very differently at different times. And that's what we're practicing through all these Dharma tools and Dharma notions.

Related to that, there are different types and modes—different degrees of non-clinging. There are different ways of non-clinging, different degrees of that. We can let go of clinging just a little bit, or deeper, deeper, deeper, deeper levels. These modes and degrees of non-clinging overlap with the greater range of practice—the flexibility of ways of looking, of modes of awareness, sensitivity.

Through all that, through the practice of all that and developing all that, the perceptual possibilities are opened. We really start to see: how I look, the way I look, conditions what I perceive. The range of perception opens up. We understand perception is empty. We understand the emptiness of all appearances through that. This brings the deepest freedom. To the degree that we see, that comes the deepest freedom in life.

But also what comes from that is further opening up. Through seeing the emptiness, we actually open up further. Through doing these practices, we open up further our sense of the range of perceptual possibilities.

The flexibility of perception is also open. Perception of the self, perception of the other, perception of world and cosmos. So there's freedom coming out of all this, and there's also this opening and flexibility, malleability of the perceptual possibilities. And that, in a way—I mean, there are definitely limits—but in a way, it's infinite. There's an infinite range, an infinite multiplicity possible for us.

So when we say "let go of clinging" or "don't cling" or this or that, it's not—in this way of living, in this way of conceiving the Dharma—it's not that we're trying to move through our life without clinging. It's rather that letting go of clinging is part of a range, or different ways of letting go of clinging are part of a range of ways of looking. Quite a subtly different but hugely different conception.

Because there's this flexibility, there's this malleability and multiplicity of the range of perception and the range of ways of looking—modes of awareness, if you like, modes of sensitivity—that we can practice and develop and open up. That means that Dharma, as practice, is not just one track, is not just one thing. Don't cling or be present or this or that. It's not simple in that way. It's rich and complex and various.

In addition to all that, as I mentioned before, we begin to recognize the necessity of fantasy, the inevitability of fantasy, and the primacy of fantasy—how much fantasy, imagination, mythos is woven into our perceiving and conceiving of the self, of our psychology and that of others, of life, of beauty, and

also of the Dharma, as I said, which includes notions of awakening and also includes the notion of the Buddha and the historical Buddha.

Now, in more recent Western philosophy, this also has a parallel in philosophy and then in more recent approaches to history as well. It's called the turn towards hermeneutics in philosophy and later in history. So really this understanding that we're always bringing, if you like, interpretations, biases, ways of looking, fantasies, into our perception of history. So it's not saying we can make anything up about the Buddha, or historically, but it is saying there is no true, objectively existing single story of the Buddha, history of the Buddha.

So we start to realize that it's imbued—our vision of the Buddha, our history of the Buddha is imbued by fantasy. And so is our vision and our sense of the Dharma and of awakening and all this stuff. And maybe in all this, for some people, they say, "I'm going beyond the Dharma now." Some people say, "I've gone beyond the Dharma."

That's the question. Is it? Is it not? How is that for you? Is it okay? What does it mean? Have we gone beyond Buddhism? How am I going to relate to that? Big, big, big questions and important ones. And not necessarily easy.

Okay, so just a few practical things. We have five or six days here together, so really all we can do is open some doors and point in some directions, give pointers and tips for practice. Some of you will want to explore these directions and these pointers much more. Some of you will really want to take this further. And of course you could, if you're listening to this later or on recording, you can take much longer to go through this material, much, much longer. Really take your time and develop it. We're cramming, if you like, quite a lot of material in a short time.

But related to that, it's also really important to realize that we have a retreat of a certain amount of days, and it can be very easy to judge the retreat in terms of what experiences arise in this period of time. But this is not a good way, not a sensible, insightful way of orienting to a retreat. It's not so much the experiences that are important. I mean, they are important, but they're not really what's crucial.

What I hope you can prioritize is understanding, developing, making your own ways of working. So really taking ways of working and conceptual frameworks and supports from the retreat. So that's really what we should regard as our aim—a sort of digestion of ways of working, a developing of skill in terms of meditative ways of working and also the concepts that support them. And that should be the aim rather than aiming for any experience.

And that's true for any retreat. Absolutely, I would say that on any retreat—the regular Insight retreat or whatever, Metta retreat, etc. But particularly here, because if I can learn the tools and learn my way around—learn the ropes, as they say—if I can learn that in terms of practice and get a sense of how the conceptual frameworks might support me in the directions I want to go, then that can stay with me.

The experiences don't necessarily stay with us—the highs of the experiences don't necessarily remain. So we really want to keep thinking about what we want to take from here, what we want to digest and integrate.

I was wondering about offering this retreat, and some of you may be listening as we go through the material and wonder: is this very advanced? The truth is, I don't know. I'm not sure. My experience is that for some people, it might be that certain other elements need to be in place before they can work well with the imaginal practices, and for some people, not. So it seems quite individual. Really the answer to the question "Is it advanced?" I would say, so far, not necessarily. It depends.

I am wondering more generally these days about a kind of curriculum—what would be the tools and meditative skills that need to be developed to really give a person the best platform for their practice to move and keep expanding, to open up into more and more adventure and possibility? That's something I'm thinking about, but I don't know if this material is necessarily advanced.

It's an interesting thing too, because a typical insight retreat would say, on the first morning: "Okay, now concentrate on your breath, and if your mind wanders, come back to being with your breath." Something like that. In a way, if we hear something like that, it sounds very simple. It sounds like that's probably the simplest possible instruction you could give—just what does it feel like when you breathe, and when the mind wanders, come back to those sensations.

So it sounds like the simplest instruction. It's certainly the most familiar for most people in the wider culture these days, and it's very easy to understand. It's also easy to understand the *why* of that instruction. Why would you do that? Because almost no one anymore in our culture, whether they meditate or not, needs convincing that focus is a good thing—the ability to focus the mind and keep it focused. Almost no one needs convincing that calm at times is a good thing. And almost no one needs convincing that it's important to be present. There's a lot of emphasis now in the popular culture about being present with the moment and all that. So it's very familiar, that kind of instruction. It's very simple and seems easy to understand, easy to understand why we would even give it.

But actually, as a teacher, I have to tell you—if you don't realize it already—that for most people it's really not easy to do. To be with the breath, to concentrate on the breath, is actually something most people really struggle with, despite that seemingly simple instruction. And we don't often elaborate much on it in many retreats because we move on to other material about being more with the general experience very quickly. So a person kind of concludes, if they stay meditating, "I'm crap at that. I'm pretty useless. My concentration is rubbish." I don't know how many people have told me that in the past. They sort of accept it and say, "That's okay, you know, whatever."

Whereas unfamiliar structures that we might be going through on this retreat—unfamiliar practices—they may be harder to grasp and even understand why we're doing them at first, but they may not necessarily be harder to *do*. So we'll find out. But don't automatically assume that they are harder just

because another kind of instruction sounds simpler or more familiar, or because it's easier to make sense of given the prevalent frameworks and conceptions that we bring to practice.

So over the days—another practical thing—we'll be unfolding different teachings and instructions. And like I said regarding this introductory talk, I'm going to mention things and then return to elaborate them in fuller detail. There's quite a lot of material, but we'll keep cycling around certain themes, many of which I've actually mentioned already in this talk, although I realize not enough for you to fully understand just from this talk alone. But there will be this kind of elaborating, returning to elaborate a bit more, et cetera, of certain key themes and directions.

In the first few days, we're going to almost solely explore and develop practices in relation to what I call the energy body. I'll explain that tomorrow morning. But we're also going to keep that as a practice—this sensitivity to the energy body—throughout the retreat. So the first few days we'll focus almost exclusively on it, and I'll explain why. There are very good reasons. But it's going to be something that's actually going to form the basis of the whole retreat.

So again, if you're listening to this on recording and you want to go through this material at home, I really, really encourage you to linger even longer developing your practice with regard to the energy body and the different ways that we're going to talk about it. Let that really be the basis for the imaginal practices as we introduce them. I will keep emphasizing that as we go through the retreat.

You may want to get or keep a notebook, certainly for the teachings. There will be many teachings, and much of this material will be quite new for most of you, including the practice instructions and practice tips. It can be helpful to jot them down so you have them available to refer back to, if you like to do that sort of thing. Then also, working with images—some people find it really helpful and quite interesting to keep a notebook of the imaginal work they're doing: the different images that arise, the themes that recur. This can be a very beautiful thing to do. So it's up to you, but some people will want to keep a record of the different threads of what's unfolding.

One very practical matter before we end. I want to encourage you to slow down if you're here on retreat for these days—an encouragement to slow down as you're walking around the house. Slow down at least a little bit, if not quite a lot, and see if you can be more gentle in your movement. First, there's no reason to go fast when you're on retreat. We're not really in a hurry here.

But why am I emphasizing this? It's certainly not to dampen your spirit or your vivaciousness or your energy—absolutely not. And it's not for the same reason as in some retreats, such as Mahasi-style retreats or others, where they would say slow down because they want to put the sensations of the body under closer scrutiny, a kind of microscopic analysis as it moves. We're not slowing down for that reason.

On this retreat, we're interested in a different kind of precision of attention. It's not a microscopic analysis of sensations. I'll explain this more tomorrow. But we're interested in a different kind of subtlety of

attention, a different kind of precision. Going a little more slowly, moving a little more gently in the way you open and close doors, handle plates, whatever it is—this allows and supports the kind of quality of awareness and sensitivity to the energy body that I'm going to introduce tomorrow.

So as you go through the retreat, just being a little more slow, a little more gentle in your movements will really support that kind of sensitivity to the whole body, and particularly to the feeling of energy in the body—what I call the energy body. This, as I mentioned, will be a very important thread throughout the retreat. It's actually an important basis for everything we're going to do in many different ways.

A skill with the energy body, an awareness and sensitivity to the energy body, as I'll explain, can become over time a profound resource to us as human beings in many different ways, and in regard to many different practices and directions of practice. So as much as you can, I really encourage you to slow down and be gentle, because it's truly going to support the investigations, explorations, and practice we'll be doing over the course of the retreat.

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