Imaginal Practice: Doorways and Directions (Part 1)

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Welcome everybody, welcome to this retreat and to this course on imaginal practice.

I think tonight, by way of introduction, I'd like to start by talking a little about imagination and particularly trying to open up some space—if that is needed—in our minds, in our hearts, and our collective psyche really, in relationship to imaginal practice. I also want to talk about the kinds of doorways and directions that exist within imaginal practice.

If we consider for a moment the range of ways that people practice with imagination, or the range of uses to which imagination is put—and particularly the kinds of directions, the kinds of conceptions that form around imagination and imaginal practice, and the kinds of flavors that practice can have—directions, conceptions, and flavors—we can see quite a range here.

The imagination can be used for planning, for creative planning, for visioning in the sense of creative visioning. For example, people talk about visioning a different future for society, for civilization, for humankind in regards to the challenges of climate change or environmental degradation and destruction. People speak about needing a new narrative, a new story there. This is a use of the imagination as visioning or inspiration.

For example, at Gaia House, we have periodically Gaia House visioning meetings. Where do we want this organization to be in five, ten, twenty years' time? What are the directions we want to move in? What would we like to see happening? It's a use of imagination in a very instrumental, practical way, really.

Then there might be, for example, the use of imagination to develop certain skills or to rehearse—in sports, to imagine a certain shot or a certain movement or situation in a game, or perhaps in music, a certain passage at the keyboard if you're a piano player, on the instrument, whatever it is. Imagining mentally can actually develop the motor skills—interestingly enough, they've found—to increase one's skill and one's performance.

Then there's a whole range of the use of imagination for self-improvement in different ways, for the cultivation of qualities or attitudes—qualities and attitudes that might be deemed helpful, necessary, worthwhile. And here the range is huge.

For example, in the *Satipatthana Sutta*, the Buddha's basic discourse on mindfulness, one of the longest subsections is in the mindfulness of the body section, and it regards the contemplation of death. Part of

that is going to what was then open cemetery grounds and contemplating corpses in different stages of decay. But the Buddha also says, well, if that's not possible, you can do it in your imagination.

What's the purpose? What's the conceptual framework that's holding that? Well, the intention behind it is for dispassion—dispassion regarding this body and to a certain extent regarding this life—and also a sense of urgency. So urgency with regard to practice, with regard to awakening and the path, and dispassion with regard to other aspects of life, and in relation to the body, etc. That's generally in the Pali Canon their reason for doing that imagination around one's death.

Here, it's interesting to note in that practice, the imagination is regarded—the images used are used in the service of realizing a concrete fact: the material decay of the body, the impermanence of the body. So that's an interesting limitation on the use of the imagination, an interesting direction. It's in the service of a concrete fact, and particularly material decay and the impermanence of the body.

Also in the Pali Canon, the Buddha, in a few different places, advises—particularly if you're beset by the hindrances or feeling a lack of inspiration or faith—he says, think about me, bring me to mind. It's called recollection of the Buddha, practice of recollection of the Buddha. And this is said to bring inspiration and bring also a sense of faith and sense of urgency, sense of possibility in oneself, in the path, in practice.

Also within the Dharma—different Dharma traditions and other spiritual traditions—there is the use of the imagination in the service of cultivating qualities like metta, loving-kindness and compassion. For example, imagining the bodhisattva of compassion, Avalokiteshvara or Kuan Yin, or imagining the Buddha, or if you're in a different tradition, imagining Jesus or Mary. And through the image, constellating, if you like, channeling perhaps these qualities of love and compassion—that helps our love and compassion increase in our hearts, helps our hearts grow into, expand into those qualities. And in some cases, also there will be a growth, a support of aspiration: What do I want to move towards in my life? What do I want my heart to open to and towards? An increase in aspiration, an increase also in faith for some.

Very similarly, or extending from those kinds of practices, is a whole vast range of tantric practices regarding the imagination—tantric visualization practices, particularly practices involving tantric deities, *yidams* they're called in Tibetan Buddhism. And this actually is quite interesting because by now, as it's moving into Western culture and becoming a bit more popularized and lots of people are doing these kinds of practices, the range of conceptions that underpin tantric practice is huge. It's really quite varied. We'll go into that perhaps more later on in the retreat.

But again, a person might be viewing the use of imagination or practicing with images in order to develop their own strength, a quality like that—my strength, my ability to be strong in life, courageous, bold, upright, set boundaries, etc. So sometimes borrowing from tantric practice, for example, the more wrathful deities—fierce, demon-looking creatures—and imagining, visualizing them in practice, in order to develop these qualities for the self and the self's unfolding path.

Even—I heard someone told me—John Kabat-Zinn in teaching mindfulness suggested on occasion to imagine oneself as a mountain or just to imagine a mountain for the purpose of bringing in or allowing in or imbuing the moment with a sense of unshakability. Unshakability of being, of perhaps equanimity, also a sense of groundedness.

So again, it's the use of the imagination in order to develop or bring in certain qualities that are helpful for the self.

And then there's a whole range of possibility—very wide these days—of certain more recent psychological and psychotherapeutic uses of imagination: Gestalt psychology and other psychotherapy and other forms. So for instance, the inner critic or the superego—beginning to imagine them and dialogue with them, perhaps put them in another chair and enact them and move between the self and the inner critic, or a figure from a dream.

But often in these kinds of psychotherapeutic approaches, all these figures—whether it's the inner critic or a figure from the dream—they're all regarded as somehow belonging to the self. They belong to me. They are parts of me somehow. And in some way I want to integrate them into me to make myself more of a whole human being, a more balanced human being. I don't want them being stronger than me somehow, more powerful. I want, in a way, to tame them, to subordinate them to some kind of more perhaps rational or at least sensible sort of executive decision-making self.

And there's a kind of unitive view there, that all these disparate figures—crazy as they might seem, uncompromising as they might seem at first, or unusual, whatever—they're all brought in to be made part of a kind of unity, a wholeness of self. And that's often the vision or the conceptual framework or the directionality of that kind of psychotherapeutic work.

And in many traditions, something as simple as looking at a candle and then shutting one's eyes and meditating, focusing on the inner image, the remembered visual image of that candle is used purely as a concentration practice. Again, it's quite a narrow directionality and conceptual framework. There's no significance given to that object—could be anything. A candle, a stone, it doesn't really matter. There's no significance at all to the imagined object. It's just an exercise that's useful for developing focus of mind, steadiness of mind.

Actually, on this retreat, starting tomorrow, we'll talk about using the imagination to develop what I call samadhi—and I'll explain how I'm going to use that word as more than concentration. I'll explain that tomorrow. But we can use images to work with opening up the energies of the body and what I'll call the energy body, which I'll also explain, to bring a sense of resource, of harmonization, of energization, of openness, of well-being into the being. So we'll explore and explain all that.

So all these, and actually many more that I want to go into in quite a lot of detail, are possible in terms of the ways, the directions we can go in with the imaginal practice and the ways we can think about

them—the conceptual frameworks we can put them in.

And of course, there's the possibility as human beings just to be lost in daydreaming, to be lost in worrying about the future and rehashing the past in what we call papañca in the Dharma tradition—just the mind spinning, perhaps with images and fantasies, but not really very helpful in any way at all.

So all that and much more is possible in terms of directions, doorways, and conceptions of imaginal work and use of images for us as human beings.

And when we get into this, and probably as we practice more with work with images and practice with them, we start to realize, I think—especially if there's an open-mindedness—that actually it begins to occur to us that the most interesting aspect of working with images and imaginal practice is not in fact the images themselves. They can be—and we'll go into this—they can be really far out or don't seem particularly interesting at first sight. But it's actually not the images themselves that are the most interesting aspect.

The most interesting aspect is rather our relationship to those images, and particularly the conceptual frameworks that we bring to bear around the images that support those images or send them in certain directions—the conceptual frameworks that we create. If you like, that aspect ends up being the most significant but also the most interesting.

Now, when we talk about that, and as I've kind of alluded to before, many conceptual frameworks are possible in terms of images and imaginal practice. Many directions are possible. For me, almost all of them are interesting and they're all okay with me. So I really want to emphasize that. All of that's okay. Well, most of them are okay in terms of how you're going to use images, how you decide to use images.

If I'm honest, I say the agenda I have for this retreat—and I do have an agenda—part of my agenda is really to support you in your practice with images and open possibilities for you. So that's my agenda, and that's partly up to you, where you want to go with it. So there is my agenda, but there's also—and you'll pick this up, I might as well flag it right now and admit it right now—I have this agenda of supporting and opening what's your desire and your inclination with regard to images.

But you'll pick up that I also have a leaning, personally, and I'm not going to hide that. I have a leaning to what we might say are more radical conceptions regarding imagination and images. I'll explain more what I mean by that, but the kind of conceptual framework around images that is most interesting to me and that I probably lean to more right now, or that range, is rarer. It has a rarer appeal, I feel, it seems to me, as I look around me and listen to people. Not that many people are interested in it, but you'll pick up that that's my leaning.

You'll see what's involved, because I'm going to unfold that quite a lot over the days. I'll explain, as I said, more what I mean by what's included in that radical conceptual framework.

But in part, part of it includes being open to the range of the kind of images that may come up or that we might entertain or work with. So, to put it a little simplistically, I am very interested and I would like to open the doorway to the whole range—in terms of the kinds of images, both the kind of gentle, sort of white light, angelic kind of diaphanous images that might appear to us full of obvious love and gentleness and kindness, and all the way to including what might seem at first darker or weirder or might seem to some sensibilities or preconceptions a little bit more disturbing, perhaps.

So I really want to open up that range and make it all really okay, really trustworthy. And I mean more than that in terms of the conceptual frame, and I'll explain more as we go.

But that's tricky, then, because I'm in the teacher role here, and so I'm asking you, if this is possible—trust what you want, how you want to orient in terms of imaginal practice, which might change for you over time.

But please trust your sense of your purpose with all this—with images, imagination, imaginal practice. It might be for some that even at the end of this retreat, after exploring all this material, you take away very little. Maybe you take away just an occasional technique using images in your dharma practice. That's all it ever becomes for you—something you use occasionally to spice things up when practice feels a little flat. That's completely fine and entirely up to you.

Or it might be that what you come to—and some of you may already be there—is something far more expansive: a total explosion, a complete revolution in your way of seeing and conceiving of practice, of dharma itself, and what that means to you. A revolutionary shift in how you see and conceive the self, existence, and the world. This isn't merely a shift but a profound, far-reaching transformation of understanding.

So we could ask: imagination and images in the service of what? In the service of self-development? Fine. In the service of standard dharma practice? Fine. In the service of something even bigger than that? That's the question. What is imaginal practice in the service of? What are images in the service of? Or rather, what am I making imaginal practice and images in the service of? What am I allowing images and imaginal practice to be in the service of? That's up to you.

I'll be honest about one of my deeper aims in offering this retreat and course. I'm deeply interested in the possibility of opening up a different sense of existence. I feel and know this is possible through imaginal practice—as it is through other means, but particularly through certain approaches to imaginal practice. The whole sense of existence, of self and others and this very world we live in, can become quite different in a beautiful, lovely, and profound way.

Wrapped up in this transformation are not just the perceptions that become available—the perceptions of self, other, and world—but also new conceptions of existence and new conceptions of dharma itself. So part of my deeper aim is opening up the sense of existence in these ways, along with the conceptions of

existence and dharma.

Part of my reason for saying this is that it implies something that may sound strange: having or getting visual images in one's practice is not really that important. We're actually introducing something else—a different sense of existence, a different conception of existence, of dharma, of practice, of the world opening up. This may affect how you approach the practice. Don't grasp after images or wonder why you're not getting them. Hold a different aim in mind at a deeper level.

Related to this, it's worth noting that in my experience, both personally and in working with individuals in imaginal practice, the whole practice evolves in many ways as one works with images more. Like many practices, it evolves toward greater subtlety, becoming subtler and subtler in numerous ways.

Often at first, imaginal practice—certainly in my experience—was quite clumsy and gross. There might be a tendency for many people to identify too tightly or closely with an image or imaginal figure. Or for a while, to feel like there are no images, that nothing is arising. One's view of what should be happening becomes too constricted. I'll explore this more later.

But whether the practice feels clumsy and gross, or whether there seem to be few images arising, either way, what can happen over time is that more subtle sensibilities begin to open. This is actually what interests me most: the support, opening, and growth of a more subtle sensibility regarding existence, regarding the world—one that is more imaginally imbued, more infused with mythos and fantasy. I'll explain what this means as we continue.

Some people are drawn to this course because they already have many dreams—vivid, intense dreams every night. Or they have images that come to them in meditation or at other times, and they feel they want a way of working with this material. They intuit that fruitfulness is possible with these images, and they sense they need a framework for conceiving of those dreams and images. This would be tremendously helpful, especially since our culture at present is quite impoverished in terms of frameworks for working with and regarding images.

The history of cultural attitudes toward images is quite fascinating. There has been, historically, considerable denigration of the imagination—both philosophically and psychologically in Western culture—over centuries, perhaps millennia. In a book called *Invisible Guests*, psychologist Mary Watkins discusses this cultural suspicion. It stems partly from the view of scientific reductionism and partly from the medical model of psychology and psychotherapy that became firmly established in the mid-19th century and onwards.

But interesting, actually, today, by way of aside, the secular mindfulness schools are also kind of rooted—not completely, but a large part of their rooting is in a kind of medical model. That's where they come from. That's what they're rooted to. That gives them certain attitudes, presumptions, and allegiances, if you like.

Historically, in the nineteenth century, there was a sort of—psychologists, and then the wider culture, would look back on people like Socrates, who spoke with his daemon, his D-A-I-M-O-N, his guiding counselor, if you like. People like Socrates, people like Swedenborg, people like St. Catherine of Siena or Dante, other great artists—many, many people.

Retrospectively, none of these people held to a medical model of psychology. None of these people had any allegiance to scientific reductionism. Yet retrospectively, nineteenth-century psychology and that whole medical basis and attitude regarded them as kind of crazy—maybe high-functioning, but kind of crazy—because of their relationship with imaginal figures.

And even, amazingly enough, Descartes, who of course was one of the hinge pins of the scientific revolution—actually I didn't know this until recently—had a being that followed him down streets urging him not to abandon his search for truth. Some kind of imaginal character followed him and kept pushing him not to abandon his search for truth. So even that would have been regarded as crazy and is regarded as crazy, despite everything else these people were able to do and give birth to in their lives.

So perhaps there is a place for artists, perhaps in some other places and dimensions of our existence, but it's pretty limited. The whole attitude in modern culture towards the imagination is not really to explore it very widely, unless it's for a very limited purpose—like you want to make a crazy movie or something, or you're a novelist.

Instead, what comes into the whole sensibility and way of seeing the world is a kind of literalism. There's just an absence of other dimensions. Everything is just what it seems to be.

You see also, more specifically, in the more common psychological assumptions as we moved into the twentieth century—still talking about the history of cultural attitudes in the West regarding images—so the psychoanalyst W. R. D. Fairbairn, who died in about 1964, I think. There, to sum it up too briefly, the attitude was: if there is inadequate parenting, the young child will seek to withdraw or escape in an unhealthy way from external reality, which he or she should be confronting, dealing with, opening to, relating to. External reality—that's the primary thing. That's what's most important. You should be doing that at the exclusion of any attending to internal fantasy, private presences, or figures.

So when there's inadequate parenting, there's a withdrawal in this view from external reality and an increase in this sort of internal private fantasy figures, and that's regarded as pathologically unhealthy for the infant and, because of that, into adult life—something very unhelpful.

Then just a little bit later, the psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott, who died in 1971, allowed a little more room for the imagination through his work with play and work with children. He had the idea of a transitional object. So for example, the teddy bear for the child is regarded as a transitional object. It's not regarded by the very young child as totally created by the self and controlled by the self, but neither is it totally something separate and discovered. It's in between those two modes of being—completely subjective,

creative and created and controlled, and completely discovered and separate from the self.

And Winnicott said, this is okay. This is even important, but it's transitional. It's a transitional phase. We want to move beyond it. Proper growth, proper psychological maturity means moving beyond and eventually leaving behind these kind of imaginal figures.

But even way before this, before the twentieth century, before the nineteenth century, James Hillman chronicles some of this in some of his writings. Even the Council of Nicaea—the church Council of Nicaea in 787 AD—there was already a doctrinal move in the church, very significant, very far-reaching, to depreciate the images and the significance and status of images.

Then, less than a hundred years later, in the Council of Constantinople, the doctrinal move to regard the soul as being purely the rational spirit—so less the realm of images. That realm of images, the soul as a realm of images—and we'll talk a lot about this over the days—that whole understanding or dimension of soul was either cut off or regarded extremely suspiciously or belittled.

And again, as the so-called Western Enlightenment, the scientific revolution of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries began and gained more momentum over the coming years, there was the emphasis and elevation of reason and reasoning and empiricism and materialism, really, and measurement over such qualities and capacities as the imagination. So that was, again, a very important move in the cultural development, if you like, in our cultural history that we've inherited.

But again, Henri Corbin, a great champion of the imaginal and a scholar of certain forms of Islamic mysticism in the twentieth century—I think he died in the seventies—points even further back than the Enlightenment and the scientific revolution to the twelfth century, when philosophically there was a debate between the school of Aristotle and the school of Averroes. Aristotle triumphed and became more influential, and this was a move away from what was the more dominant Platonism. Again, with that comes—laid the seeds for empiricism and a denigration of the imagination, the place of images.

Why am I saying all this? Because it's our cultural heritage. It's the air we breathe. Or more than that, it's the water we swim in, like a fish swims in water and doesn't—well, who knows what fish think—but doesn't even realize. We don't even realize. This is the dominant view that we imbibe and that we think through and see through. We see everything by means of this view regarding images and imagination.

So all of these aspects of the cultural history—just highlighting a few points there—all of these and more give rise to or set in place, often quite rigidly, a whole set of attitudes and a whole set of beliefs, in fact, regarding the imagination, regarding the self, regarding psychology.

Beliefs are interesting because most of the beliefs we have encrust and encase and enclose the views that we have, and oftentimes we're not even fully conscious of what our beliefs are about self and selves and psychology and images and reality and all of that.

We can even believe that we have no beliefs, or that because we are practicing mindfulness, we have transcended beliefs entirely. "I've gone beyond beliefs," we might think. But no—look a little closer. There's a lot more going on in terms of unexamined, unconscious beliefs.

All of these cultural and historical events, movements, and developments create and set in place a kind of enclosing space—even a weight—of attitudes and beliefs that inform our practices. They shape what we practice and what we don't practice, how we practice and how we don't practice. This, to me, is very important to realize and then to investigate.

It's been interesting for me in recent years, teaching imaginal practice and finding ways to work with people around this dimension of dharma. I've noticed there are four main reasons—four common objections—that some have to imaginal practice, or what we might call imaginal dharma.

The first is the fear that surely it will make you crazy. "You start entertaining all these images and fantasies, you lose touch with reality, it fragments the self—you'll go crazy." This is quite a common concern I encounter.

The second reason relates to what I've been discussing: the dominant cultural view regarding what is real is immensely influential and usually unquestioned. This is simply what we absorb from culture, what we learn in school. Most people don't have adequate philosophical tools to really explore and question these assumptions. We just absorb them from the culture.

This is why I speak of a metaphysics being provided—usually unconscious, usually unquestioned. What do I mean by metaphysics? Traditionally, in philosophy, it involves three areas: ontology, which investigates what is real and classifies what is real and what is not real; epistemology, which examines how we know anything, how we gain knowledge, what knowledge we can trust (for example, imagination is deemed untrustworthy, but if we can measure something, or kick it, or others agree on it—if it's not merely subjective—then this is knowledge we can trust); and cosmology, which asks about the structure of this world, this cosmos we inhabit.

These three areas form a kind of metaphysics that we simply absorb from the dominant culture, usually unconsciously and unquestioningly. This affects all kinds of things in our lives and hugely impacts our practice. It profoundly shapes how we think of, regard, relate to, and conceive of images and imaginal practice.

The third reason some might object to imaginal practice is that when we really open to this dimension, we sometimes sense it may invite us to go beyond the whole paradigm of ending suffering or reducing suffering—which is central to the Dharma as most people conceive it. The Four Noble Truths are all about suffering and its cessation. Yet practicing with images, we start to sense different inclinations becoming available, different directions, a different range beyond just that. This may not sit comfortably with some people, though I'll speak more about this.

The fourth reason involves the content of the images themselves. The images that arise, or that people hear about in teachings or from others sharing their experience, don't fit into their usually unconscious fantasy or mythos of what Dharma should look like. The stranger images, the more erotic images, the weirder or so-called darker images—these don't match the fantasy flavor of Dharma they've entertained, and this feels disturbing. Something is pushing against familiar limits.

Related to this is when images feel foreign, outside the range of fantasy, image, mythos, or archetype that a person favors or feels comfortable with. There's also often an operating assumption that the self-image should be quite singular rather than plural. When a multiplicity of self-images arises—when multiple images in the psyche are given equal validity, equal beauty and significance—this opens the whole sense of self away from singularity into plurality. For some people, this too feels unsettling.

However, some people are not comfortable with the dominant cultural view. They're not okay with all of that, and they find themselves drawn to imaginal practice—drawn, in fact, for many reasons.

It might be, for example, that they are attracted to or they already sense other dimensions of self. They sense themselves or their being or their psyche in this more pluralized way—and not in a way that's necessarily crazy. This multiplicity might feel attractive, ring true as deeper, more interesting in the sense of the self. And so that quality is opened through imaginal practice.

Something feels bigger and more wide-ranging than the typical humanistic way we tend to regard the self these days in our culture. Perhaps a person resonates with, finds meaningful, intuitively recognizes a kind of truth to a more archetypal notion of the self—the self, our human self, as if you like, channel of some other... it's hard to put into words... some angelic or archetypal being. And what kind of reality does that have? We'll get to talk about all this. Someone senses that in and through their life, actually senses it, feels their life that way, or intuits it already, perceives self that way. Sometimes that is the case, and that makes imaginal practice very attractive.

And for some people, imaginal practice legitimizes, it finds a place, it re-sanctifies certain aspects of being that can very easily be sidelined or dismissed or denigrated or looked down on. Eros and the erotic. More wrathful energies. Divine madness. A tricksterish quality—not so straightforward and simple. All these are dimensions, if you like, of being. They are archetypal faces. They are aspects of self, and a person might feel that they have been squeezed out or unlegitimized, their holiness not seen. So this also makes imaginal practice very attractive to many people.

In relation to that, it's quite interesting now because I would say that our modern sense of self—well, long before the 21st century even, but our modern sense of self—it seems to me, as I read the Pali Canon, obviously talking with so many people, our modern sense of self is not the sense of self, the experience of self and the whole notion of self and personality that existed at the time of the Buddha and the Pali Canon.

So you read the Pali Canon, there's almost no reference to anyone suffering with inner critic, which is

epidemic in our culture, so huge in relation to the kind of self we feel we have. I don't see anyone who suffers from feeling like they're not expressing themselves, or even regards self-expression as something important. Or anyone who talks about something being repressed in themselves or their self-expression. No one relates the pain of, for example, not feeling seen deeply or met deeply or heard deeply. These are very modern experiences—notions, experiences, feelings, sensibilities. No one complained, it seems to me back then, about their self-expression being blocked.

So it seems to me that we need something more in our notion of the self for the modern West. In the modern West, I think there's quite a lot of confusion around the self, which is a whole interesting thing in itself. We live in a culture where the self is very emphasized and highlighted and sort of celebrated, and has a kind of triumph. There's an elevation of the self. But at the same time, we really poo-poo ego and point at that very quickly—especially in spiritual circles—and are very quick to regard this or that as a manifestation of ego. So we have a confused relationship with the self and its importance, what it actually is, how we experience it, how we relate to it.

But even more than that, the modern West has a kind of poor or thin, relatively poor, relatively thin, uninteresting psychology around personhood—not really honoring of personhood as fully, as extensively as might be possible. We seem a bit confused about all this.

And with personhood, somehow we sense palpably the beauty of a person, and yet intellectually we're supposed somehow to regard their personhood, a person's personhood, as having its roots in nature and biology and neurology or genetics, and/or in nurture—the so-called nature-nurture debate—in the environment, in environmental causes and conditions. So the roots are, if you like, pretty thin for this personhood which we somehow also, many of us, feel to be so beautiful, so important, such a lovely dimension of existence, of being alive.

There is also in that this whole sense of the singularity of self that we're sort of accustomed to conceiving of—a singular self, versus a more multiple self, although in some situations that is acknowledged. And this is one of the things that I want to open up on this retreat: a wider, more pluralized sense of self, as I said earlier.

Now this is not just the same as some of the ways some people talk of anattā, this teaching of not-self of the Buddha. We're not just wanting to say, "Oh yes, I have many characters in me," and then sort of just let them be, or not empower them. We want actually—or I want to emphasize this—in some of what I want to present over the coming days, the possibility of empowering those characters, that multiplicity, of bringing them to life, vivifying them, giving them more life, of viewing them differently.

So sometimes this multiplicity is acknowledged, but sometimes it's just on the road to sort of disempowering these different characters, if you like, that make us up, if you want to put it that way. But I'm interested in something different.

Sometimes it's recognized. So, for example, F. Scott Fitzgerald, the novelist, wrote, "There never was a good biography of a good novelist. There couldn't be. He's too many people if he's any good." So it's recognized that there's that plurality. But I want to go even beyond just the recognition of it.

For some people, exploring imaginal practice even briefly, they begin to sense quite quickly how it frees up the sense of self in relation to what I was describing. A flexibility comes into the self-view. Quite a few people have said to me they experience a sense of liberation through playing with imaginal practice. In a way, one is playing and practicing with a flexibility of self-view and world-view. In imaginal practice, one explores that flexibility of views of self and world in different ways.

For some people, it unfolds in reverse. As their practice matures and they begin to have broader and deeper insights into emptiness—and for some, through engagement with modern philosophy and postmodernism—doors open for them in their practice and in their life that re-validate or make valid the imagination, the exploration of imaginal images.

Some people are drawn to imaginal practice and begin to realize, simply by paying attention more sensitively and intently—more discerningly—to their experience and psychological processes, that fantasy and image already imbue our life. They permeate even what we regard as the Dharma itself—our path, our practice, everything that involves. Some people recognize this already, and that realization invites them through a doorway in certain directions related to exploring images.

Then there are those who already have a sense of existence, a sense of the world and cosmos that is not confined by the dominant cultural view of what I call modernism. Or they're drawn to opening that up—opening up a different sense of existence, of the world, of the cosmos. This is the thrust of tantric practice: to open up that different sense of world, cosmos, and existence.

In the Jewish tradition, modern scholarly writings speak of the midrashic condition. Midrash in Jewish tradition represents their interpretations of biblical passages. What's fascinating is that there's never a single right view and wrong view. There's always this infinity of interpretations, an infinity of openings possible for any piece of text. Some modern scholars have described the midrashic condition—this way of being that sees not just the Bible, but also self, other, world, and cosmos as open, infinitely open to an infinite range of interpretability.

Through this approach—whether through tantra, this midrashic condition, or what we're doing—there can be something I feel is so important, so beautiful: a re-enchanting of the cosmos. This is something perhaps that the world and human civilization at present desperately needs—a re-enchanting of the cosmos, an opening of our sense of what is sacred.

Some people are drawn to imaginal practice because they sense this possibility—perhaps clearly, perhaps just vaguely or intuitively—through imaginal practice.

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