A Little Exercise for the Imagination

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Let's do a little exercise together now. If you want to come into your meditation postures, establish yourself, take a few moments to establish the posture. Upright, comfortable, awake and alert, yet relaxed and open. Receptive.

Just settling into the body, connecting with how the body feels right now. Spreading the awareness throughout the whole body, the energy body, sensitive to the whole energy body. Just abiding there, inhabiting that space of the energy body with awareness for a moment or two.

Let's see if you can, as we've mentioned briefly, stay in touch with that sense of the energy body. It's never something you really lose as we do this exercise. So there's the awareness, the sensitivity to how the energy body feels as we play a little bit with this little exercise.

With that sensitivity as the basis, as something, a touchstone if you like, is it possible to imagine, to conjure in the imagination, to allow into the imagination a peach—a juicy, ripe peach right there, right in front of your nose, right under your nose? Can you feel its texture in the imagination, the sort of furry texture under your fingertips that peaches have? Maybe you can see it—colors of reds and oranges, yellows? Maybe not. Maybe you can smell this peach, that particular aroma that peaches have. This might be very subtle in the imagination.

What if you bite into that peach now and it's particularly juicy? Maybe the juices dribble down your chin from the corners of your mouth. Can you taste it?

So it might be that some sense door aspect of the imagination was easier there for you than others. That would be very normal.

What about an apple? Should we try an apple? So similarly, maybe it's a Granny Smith apple, you know, those dark green apples. And again, it's right there. Can you feel it in your hand, the hardness of it? Can you smell it, that particular smell that apples have, those kind of apples? The smell of freshness. Different kind of texture under the fingertips. Smooth.

What if you bite into that? Can you hear the crunch biting into this green apple? And the taste then in the mouth, that particularly tart taste, almost sour some of them, the apples.

Play with this very, very lightly. See what works for you.

How about a rose? If I say, can we bring a rose, the image of a rose, what happens? Is that a visual image

for you? Or do you smell it? Can you get a sense, a flavor of the fragrance of this rose? Can you feel its delicate petals between your fingers? Smooth, or maybe slightly dragging on the fingertips. Maybe you can sense it somehow. Somehow you get a sense of this rose. Maybe somehow you sense, what color is it? What color is this rose? It may not be that you see that color, but somehow you sense it.

Remember to keep some of the awareness with the energy body, with the whole energy body, and just playing with the sense or senses plural of this rose. And you can let that go.

How about trying to enter in the imagination the image of your bedroom at home where you live? Your bedroom. And again, perhaps you can see it. Perhaps you have some other sense of it. What is the feel, the vibe, if you like, the feeling right now of your bedroom for you that you get in relationship to that image of your bedroom? It might be a whole combination. It might be quite a rich vibe feeling. It might be quite subtle. It might be peaceful or restful, or it's a mess, or all kinds of things. And just, maybe you can even look around the bedroom.

Maybe you get more of a sense of what's in it—the different furniture and other things. This image, in whatever way it's coming, of your bedroom, and also the sensitivity to the energy body, and also the awareness of the feeling, the vibe that your bedroom has right now for you in the image. The vibe that's with the image, maybe.

Now again, staying with the energy body here and now, the feeling of energy, that whole space that we've been talking about. And opening your eyes. We're still doing the exercise. So opening your eyes and just looking around the room—this room here and now that you're in. So not your bedroom, this room that we're in right now. And just glancing around, getting a sense of the whole room. Maybe it's a room you know very well. Maybe it's less familiar to you, but just getting a sense of it.

And then again, closing the eyes and seeing if in the imagination this room can be alive to you—the image of this room that we're in right here, right now. Staying with the energy body, seeing what comes in terms of the image or with the image of this room. What kind of feeling does it have or feelings? What's the vibe or the complex of vibes with this room?

Beauty, perhaps. Dread for some people. Sanctity, safety, love. Purity, devotion—can be many things, or not much at all. But just notice if there is a feeling or a vibe that goes with the image of this room right now. And aware of the energy body as you sit here with that image of the room. Of course that may well include the presences of others right here, right now—the images of the presences of others.

Now how about, let's move on from that—how about trying the house or apartment, a house or apartment of your childhood, somewhere where you grew up or spent a portion of your growing up years. Is it possible to let that come as an image, this house or apartment from years ago perhaps?

Maybe you can sense it from the outside. Maybe you can enter into that house or that apartment in the imagination and explore. Enter the rooms. Again, it may not be visual—it may be some other sense. It

might be a smell. It might have certain sounds associated with this house, this apartment. Perhaps some of the furniture or carpets—there's a certain texture even in the body.

And see if you can include an awareness again of the feeling, the vibe, or the emotional resonances that come up with this image of the house or different rooms in the house as you're exploring it, in the apartment.

Okay, so it doesn't matter whether you got all the way through the house, if it was a big house, or you really slowed down. It doesn't matter. It's just playing a little bit, an exercise to illustrate something.

Now let's move on. And is it possible to allow into the imagination, or bring into the imagination, conjure the image or the sense of someone you love? Friend, family member, lover, teacher, student—someone you love.

And again, it may be a visual image. It may be you see them very, very clearly. Maybe you see them vaguely in the eyes of the imagination. It may be more you just have a sense of them—their particular personhood, their presence that's particular to that person, something recognizably them, a feel, a vibe, but somehow someone you love and their presence in the imagination.

Again, staying in touch with the energy body, feeling how that feels as you dwell with and lightly focus on, holding the attention, this image of someone you love. Maybe you can feel the love and the particular qualities or kind of love you have for this person. You feel your enjoyment of them, your delight in their being.

You can gently let them go—the image of them go—if you like, and see: is it possible to imagine yourself at the seaside? Maybe not one of those crowded tourist beaches, but a more solitary beach. Perhaps there's one or two others there. Perhaps this person you love is there with you. Perhaps you're there alone.

Can you hear the surf crashing? Is it crashing waves, or is it gentle lapping waves? Maybe you can hear seagulls. Maybe you can feel sand underneath your bare feet? Is it sandy beach, or is it pebbles or rocks? Is it hot? You smell the sea air.

And when we say something like "smell the sea air," it's partly sensual, it's partly also the whole vibe of that and the whole resonances that that might have for you—the smell of sea air right by the water.

Is it possible to imagine yourself walking along the water's edge? Perhaps running or even dancing by the ocean there, by the water's edge on this deserted beach. A lot of energy, vitality, a lot of vital chi, energy.

Perhaps you can feel that. It's almost as if you feel the movement of the imaginal body there dancing. Feel that somehow at the same time as this physical body is sitting here still—sensitive to the energy body—we can feel this other movement, this other body, the imaginal body dancing, leaping, perhaps turning.

Just connecting with that imaginal environment, that imaginal scene, in whatever ways work for you.

Letting yourself be playful, seeing if you can come into close contact with that.

Or how about a different scene? Entering some woods or forest on an autumn day, late autumn, and the forest floor is covered with leaves, with autumn leaves. Can you hear them perhaps crunching underfoot, or is it soggy, damp?

Can you get a sense of the vivid autumnal colors of the trees, the remaining leaves on the trees? Can you get a sense of the air? Sometimes those autumn days are bright and crisp, clear. Sometimes they have more of this foggy quality. Damp.

Maybe you can touch the trunk of a tree, feel its bark, the texture of the bark on the palm of your hand, on your fingertips—the solidity, perhaps even the beauty, the venerability of this tree.

So again, we're open, we're including the sense of the emotional vibes and the resonances. It's part of the image.

And one last one. How about a piece of music or a passage even—just a passage of music that you love, that you know very well, that's familiar to you? Maybe you can hear it really clearly. Maybe you just have a sense of it. Maybe you hear some parts of it, or it's just the quality of it, the vibration.

Somehow you can perhaps imagine or let play in the imagination this piece of music. Again, as you're listening to that, letting that play in the imagination, still sensitive to the whole energy body and the energetic and emotional resonances of that piece of music for you right now.

So maybe it brings energy, expands. Maybe it's exuberant. Maybe it's more melancholy, gentle. How does it affect the energy body? What are the emotional resonances there? It doesn't matter if you don't have words for these things, labels.

Okay, and when you're ready, just opening your eyes slowly.

So we're actually a little unsure whether to do this exercise at all—a little ambivalent about that—in case it gave the wrong idea of what we're doing and where we're going with this whole imaginal practice, or where I was most interested in going. But there is a reason for doing it.

So many people say to me, "Oh, I don't get images. I don't know what you're talking about. I've heard about people—I don't have that. I never see anything." But I hope from this little exercise, just playing a little bit, you can realize that when I use the word "image," first of all, I'm not talking about anything necessarily visual. It may be visual, it may include the visual, but it's not necessarily that.

Some people are very visual, some people are not visual. Someone else is very aural—their ear imagination is very developed—and some people are less so. There's individual styles of sensitivity to the image, to images, and one person may have different senses that are alive for them, and each image might be predominantly this one or that one. So there's a great range here.

The second reason for doing something like this is actually to realize that in some ways we can train the imagination. In many ways we've been trained out of the imagination. But doing this sort of thing, playing with it a little bit—I would rather work with images that are more meaningful for you than some of these might have been, like an apple or whatever—but one can actually train with images.

The more one puts oneself in contact with images and tunes to them and focuses on them and stays sensitive, the more that sensitivity develops. The imaginal sensitivity develops. We become sensitive to images. It's something we can practice. Through that, images can become for us generally more vivid, and we can feel that they become—we become more connected to—we feel more connected and the whole thing is more alive like that, more vivid.

But really, and why I was ambivalent about this exercise, is I don't want to give the impression that imaginal practice—and I'm going to emphasize this again as we go through—I didn't want to give the impression that imaginal practice is primarily about the sensual details of the image. They may be very strong, they may not be very strong. In a way, it's not so important.

So whether I can really taste the tartness of that apple—it may be significant, but it may not be that important at all. The sensual aspect of the images, the sensual details of the images, are not always that important.

We will be more interested on this retreat, and in the kind of directions we want to go, with more of what I call the vibe or the resonances—emotionally, energetically, in terms of meaningfulness—than the sensual details, which may or may not be vivid and clear and very detailed.

But the vibes, the resonances—this is something that we want to develop our sensitivity to and get more and more sensitive, more and more exquisitely tuned to. They may be clearer than the more visual details or sensual details of the image.

Still, this may give you a sense of what's possible.

It's really—I'll talk about this again, but I'm just wanting to give a sense of what's possible. And especially if you feel, "Oh, I can't relate to this at all because I don't have images," please don't let that discourage you. The invitation here is much broader and more inclusive than it might initially appear.

What we're exploring together is a vast territory of inner experience, one that extends far beyond the visual realm. Some of you may find that your imaginal capacity expresses itself through other doorways—perhaps through feeling-tones, or energetic sensations, or a quality of knowing that has its own intelligence and wisdom. The key is remaining open to however this faculty wants to manifest in your unique system.

Remember, we're not trying to force anything or create experiences that aren't naturally arising. Instead, we're cultivating a receptive awareness, a kind of listening that allows us to notice and appreciate

whatever subtle movements of consciousness are already present. This is a practice of deep intimacy with our own being, honoring the particular ways our inner landscape wants to reveal itself.

As we continue this exploration together, let yourself be curious rather than concerned about whether you're doing it "right." There is no single right way. There is only your way, your particular doorway into this rich dimension of practice. Trust that whatever is arising—or not arising—is perfect material for our investigation.

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