Energy, Image, Emotion (Part 2)

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Let's explore this whole thing about difficult emotions a little bit more—difficult emotion and the nexus with energy and image.

Difficult emotion has energy in it, but the energy is caught in a vortex, an unhelpful vortex. If that difficult emotion can give rise to an image or an image can constellate there in that or through that, then sometimes what happens is the image functions in a way that the energy that's caught up in the unhelpful vortex in the difficult emotion, the energy harmonizes. It's somehow allowed to flow. In this example, actually in all the examples, it's allowed to flow or it's channeled. The image creates a channel for the energy.

Afflictive or difficult emotions hold and trap energy. There's a lot of energy in them, but it's trapped, it's in the vortex, in some kind of vortex. And that energy—I mean psychic energy. By the way, when I use the word psychic on this retreat, I don't mean extrasensory perception, ESP and all that. I mean of the psyche. So energy of the psyche, psychic. Psychic energy is trapped by the afflictive emotion, in the afflictive emotion, and also the subtle physical energy of the energy body.

Anger is quite interesting, just by way of example. Anger has a lot of energy in it. And let's make a differentiation right away. Anger and ill will, if I just use these words in two different ways. So anger is not necessarily the same as ill will. Ill will means the will, the wanting, the wishing for harm or suffering to befall another. I want them to suffer, I want them to hurt, I want them to be in pain or be humiliated or this or that. That's what I would call ill will. Anger often does include ill will, but it doesn't need to. It's something that can actually be freed from ill will, and I'm going to explain this a little more in a minute.

But anger has a lot of energy in it. And sometimes what happens is a person actually feels quite low energy or a bit depressed or down. And actually what's going on there sometimes is that anger is there, wrapped up or sort of down in the being. Not ill will, but anger. And it's blocking the energy. It's there and it needs recognizing and allowing. And what's happening is somehow a person is not allowing themselves to see that anger and feel it and not allowing the flow of that anger. And that's keeping the whole being in a kind of low energy depressed state.

When the anger is connected with, recognized and allowed as energy, then the energy body can actually expand. Instead of being contracted and down, it can actually expand, become big or even very big and the awareness expand with it. Maybe there will be an image with that. For example, it could be an image of a wrathful deity or a demon or something. Maybe it's without image. But that anger in the energy body is then, when it's felt and allowed and open to and allowed to open the energy body, it is at that point not

an afflictive emotion anymore. It's more like creative energy. It's something we can do something with, use to fuel a skillful response.

That state of being low energy or slightly depressed or dull, for some people, it actually becomes kind of a default groove, much as for other people, it's a state of more agitation that becomes a default groove, the habit of the energy system of the psyche of the being. Sometimes a person doesn't even realize that we're in a groove here. They become used to it over time, sometimes over years. They've got nothing much to compare it to. They don't feel depressed. It's just a normal kind of literally depression of the energy. And sometimes, as I said, what's going on there is something, for instance, anger or libido or eros or some kind of psychic energy is not recognized, not felt and contacted and allowed to flow. And then the whole being is in this kind of low energy state where actually there's a lot of energy potentially available. So a person thinks they have this kind of personality, whatever, and something else a little bit different is going on.

If an image constellates from the emotion, that image may be a very high energy image that correlates with, that reflects the energy in the anger. So, for example, an image of a warrior or some other obviously energetic image. But it might arise from the feeling of anger, the energy of anger, or actually from feeling into the low energy contracted state. I'm with this, and then it doesn't feel like there's energy at all, and suddenly this warrior image or this high energy image comes. Interesting.

But if we go into this nexus of emotion, energy, and image a little bit more, I want to point out something important: images hold many shades of emotion. They are actually, if you like, more complex than a single emotion. One image can hold at the same time different qualities, even seemingly contradictory emotions or different shades. It's quite a complex, rich phenomenon, an image. There's a lot of information in it—though I don't know if that's the best word.

So images hold quite a lot by way of emotion and shades of emotion. But an image also holds more than this, and I'll talk more about this as we go on in the retreat. It can hold, for example, a sense of duty. When that liquid was poured in the earlier example, what came with that was a sense of duty and the energy for that duty. So it's more than just emotion. There's some other meaningfulness and beauty and depth that can be tied up—that is usually tied up—in an image.

So there are many shades of emotion, perhaps, not just one emotion, and actually more than just emotion. There is the aspect of soulfulness, which is more than emotion. It's more than heartfulness. This includes, as well as emotion, the psychic resonances, the meaningfulness, the depth, the sense of depth, different kinds of beauty. All of this is one way of saying that an image is, if you like, a richer, more multi-dimensional, more complex and multi-aspected phenomenon than an emotion. Image is very rich.

Now I mentioned in the introductory talk that part of what we are interested in is expanding our range—psychologically for ourselves, but also expanding our emotional range and our range of images that are meaningful and beautiful to us. It's expanding the range of emotion and image. This is, for me, an important aspect of imaginal practice.

It's interesting as an example of where we can get quite limited in our vision, if you like, in our conception regarding emotion and image. John Coltrane, the great jazz saxophone player in the 1950s and 1960s—in his late period it was, I mean all his life it was very high energy, intense music, but in his very last period before he died it was ultra-intense. The jazz world probably hadn't quite experienced anything like that before. It was really, really intense music.

He was friends by that point with the Indian sitar player Ravi Shankar, and they would meet and listen to each other's music and study a little bit. I think John Coltrane was more studying some Indian music. But Ravi Shankar said to him at one point, "I'm disturbed by this, what I hear in your playing—all the anger. It disturbs me."

And John Coltrane was quite visible in his response: "I'm not angry." It wasn't that John Coltrane was out of touch with his anger. It was just that this intensity, that shrieking through the saxophone, the screaming, the roaring—it was not anger in that sense. It wasn't ill will. It wasn't what Ravi Shankar thought it was.

So Ravi Shankar's emotional view or vision of emotional range was much smaller, and his image of what's beautiful and what's possible and what's okay—or even holy—was smaller in this case than John Coltrane's.

There's a distinction here, and it's important to make. Usually with anger, when we feel angry, there are two aspects. We're lost in the object—all the attention is on who or what we're angry at, judging this person or hating them. And we're not so aware of ourselves and our energy. Secondly, usually, unfortunately, when there's anger, there's ill will. We wish in some way harm or that this person suffers in some way.

But in imaginal practice, there can be a kind of anger, a kind of rage even, but one notices with imaginal practice that there isn't the same concern with the object or whoever I'm angry at. So there can be a warrior image, a raging warrior fighting, but the enemy is not even seen in the image. It's not even so important. There is no ill will, so to speak. The attention, the relationship with the image, is more on the imaginal figure itself—entering into that warrior image, for example—not so much with who I want to suffer and who I want to kill.

I don't know what would be a better word here, because I'm not talking about identifying with that or literalizing a warrior image or being tightly identified with that. But there's a kind of entering into those qualities, and that imaginal figure—in this case the warrior—is what one tunes into, not so much the object of the anger or the enemies.

There's a second aspect here in relation to all this, which is alluded to in that example with John Coltrane and Ravi Shankar. There can be a sense with an image that it gives a rightness, it gives a place, and even a kind of holiness—a kind of divinity or archetypal necessity, we could say—to what one is going through, to

the image and the way the image then shapes what one is going through.

This is different than an ego justification. Usually when I'm angry I feel I'm completely right and this person is wrong, and the ego just finds ways of wanting to justify itself and its stance and its actions or its obnoxiousness or whatever. This is different. This is more subtle. Through an image that's alive and soulful and meaningful, meaningfulness and place are given to something that we're going through emotionally.

So a person might feel, perhaps in a certain community or group, some alienation or isolation because of some difference or something. And out of that there may be some loneliness, and that's the emotion.

And feeling into that, perhaps a different image arises—maybe a wanderer, a solitary wanderer. This wanderer in the image is alone, perhaps even carries a degree of loneliness, but somehow the emotion is transformed or shaded, given a whole other level of depth and meaningfulness through the image. It's no longer just dukkha, just simple suffering and alienation. It's given something—it's given a kind of beauty.

In the words of James Hillman, "a pain has found its God"—has found its archetype. Through the image, we discover its true place psychically, and it's given this depth and meaningfulness.

Or again, in that image of liquid being poured through the crown of my head—that did not lead to a simple letting go of the situation, a dropping of my view. What came instead was a kind of poise, a firmness, a resolve, an increase in energy, without taking away the difficulty of the situation and its pain. It wasn't just "let go, drop it, be peaceful." Something else entirely.

So we've explored how we can direct our intention toward samadhi, and through that sometimes what's difficult energetically or emotionally dissolves or gradually transforms into the pleasant. That's one possibility.

We can also focus skillfully on the emotions themselves, working with how they reflect in the energy body. Sometimes this can gradually dissolve what is difficult, what's stuck or painful in the midline of the energy body. Sometimes, as I mentioned, emotions become more subtle before they dissolve. Sometimes the emotion remains, perhaps growing subtler, but a sweetness begins to pervade around it—the sweetness of connection, the sweetness of that pain being truly held. This is a very important possibility to recognize.

And sometimes being with an emotion more loosely gives rise to an image spontaneously. We can also deliberately bring a helpful image in relation to a difficulty. Whether spontaneous or deliberate, this image can dissolve the difficulty, transforming what's challenging in the emotions or energy body.

This opens an interesting area for inquiry: our reactions to these transformations might reveal attitudes and assumptions we hold regarding emotions and our emotional life. When I practice and an emotion dissolves, or slowly transforms and becomes sweeter or turns pleasant, or when an image arises and

difficulty becomes lovely, I might think, "Oh, that can't be right" or "That's wrong." What's happening there?

Or perhaps I have the opposite attitude—I'm trying to meditate, trying to cultivate samadhi, and this emotion feels like a nuisance. These reactions to transformations reveal much about our attitudes toward emotions. Do we see emotions as nuisances standing in the way, mere papañca? Or do we assume, at the other extreme, that emotions are somehow sacrosanct—primary aspects of being that hold an essential truth we must always respect and never try to change?

As we meditate in different ways and witness different unfoldings of experience, noticing our reactions to these unfoldings can teach us much about our attitudes and assumptions. We can also observe what we're willing to try and what we instinctively avoid in practice. We can become attached to certain views regarding emotion and energy.

We might also be attached to always needing to know why a difficult emotion is present. I feel sad and want to understand why. Sometimes this is helpful and the cause is clear. But sometimes we simply don't know why the sadness or other emotion is there—it's not obvious. Sometimes sadness arises from being physically low in energy or something out of balance in the physical energy. Sometimes it's even possible that we're picking up another's sadness. It's not mine, yet I'm searching for its cause in my psychology, my experience, my past.

William Blake said that emotions are "divine influxes." This offers quite a different perspective. Sometimes something else flows through us—not so much about another person, but something from another level of being, an influx manifesting as emotion.

Sometimes we become attached to knowing why, always seeking reasons or demanding memories when afflictive emotions arise. When grief or fear can't be connected to something present, we search for a memory. While this can be very helpful at times and sometimes leads to important discoveries, it can also reveal that we're creating stories. To always seek reasons or demand memories places too much pressure on our emotional and energetic life, betraying certain limiting assumptions about how our inner world operates.

So with, again, around the nexus of emotion, energy, and image—a yogi on retreat, this was quite a while ago, reported a dream to me. I can't remember if the dream was from ages before, but it was quite a comic dream. It was a row of naked men standing in a line in the dream, masturbating at the same time and then ejaculating simultaneously. And there was something quite comical about that.

But afterwards she was talking about it and she said, "Oh, it's just life energy." And I said, "Oh, hold on, hold on, hold on. If you just say that, then actually what's happening—you just say, 'Oh, that's just life energy, it's just an expression of life energy, that image'—what's happening is that in that kind of interpretation, it's too broad. We're losing a lot of the subtlety, a lot of the particularities of that image,"

which was—it's sexual, it's male, there's something comic about it. It's very, very particular. Even more particular than whatever words we might put on it, like "sexual" or "male" or this or that. There's something utterly irreducible about an image.

So in terms of reducing an image to energy—in this case just a vague energy—be careful of that, because we lose a lot of the subtlety and distinction that images contain so naturally.

Sometimes we feel, in our practice or just in our life, there is an emotion, a strong emotion, and then out of that emotion comes an image, as I mentioned before. I might even use the language that the emotion constellates the image. And we tend to think, again, or a person can think, that the emotion is what's primary. But it doesn't actually necessarily imply that the emotion is what's primary and the image is what's secondary—what comes out of the emotion as an expression of it or just a re-presentation of that emotion. Not necessarily.

It's not necessarily the case that the emotion causes the image or constellates the image, even though I might use that language sometimes, or that the psychic energy causes the image. It may be that an emotional upset indicates that an image is operating in the psyche, but we're not yet conscious of it. And the energy of the image is trapped in this vortex because it's not conscious. So the energy is coming from the image—a different way around. Instead of emotion being primary, we could see that image is primary. Instead of energy being primary, we could see the image is primary. Maybe that image is primary and what gives rise to emotion and energy.

So in relation to these three—energy, emotion, image—what's the truth? Which is the cause there? What's the truth? Which is the one that's primary? Well, actually, like so many of these things, they all influence each other. They all, in dharma language, dependently co-arise, or we could say they influence each other. They have an effect on each other. In some ways, we could say they're not really that separate.

And to bring in this other piece that I mentioned at the start of this talk: the views that we have are also part of all that. So the views that I have of this image, the relationship with it, the views that I have of emotion, of energy, of the image, affect what happens. Now this is true generally for our perceptions and our experience, but in this case even more particularly. The view of which of these is primary—whether it's energy, emotion, or image, how I'm conceiving of that in the moment—affects how things unfold. The view that I have of what is primary affects how things unfold. And I can experiment and see that for myself in practice. It's very interesting.

And as I realize that, it opens up a possibility. Can I play with different views? And can I play with different views of what is primary here? And this becomes part of navigating imaginal practice. We'll talk about this more later.

And really, a big part of what we're doing, as I'll come back to in later talks, is we're playing with the conception, the view, that image is primary, that fantasy and mythos are primary. We're playing with that

view and seeing what that does.

And just to finish, to put that again in a larger context, which I mentioned yesterday: the larger context is a vision of the dharma, an understanding of the dharma as exactly that—as playing with views, with ways of looking. That's what the dharma is. That's what practice is. We're practicing, through lots of different practices, we're practicing a flexibility of view and of ways of looking. And through that, it's opening the range of our experience and our perception. Those two words I'm using as synonyms—experience and perception, appearance—these all mean the same thing.

Through practicing flexibility and moving between different views and ways of looking, I see that it opens up the range of experience. And I see, "Ah, this way of looking, things appear that way. This other way of looking, they appear a different way." So meditation itself is the practice of different ways of looking. And seeing how appearances, experience, perception changes with different ways of looking.

Through that, I understand the emptiness of any perception. It's not really like this. It looks like that. It seems like that. It appears like that. The perception, the experience is like this because I'm looking in this way. And understanding the emptiness of that thing, of things, of perceptions, of experiences, allows even more flexibility, allows me to practice even more flexibility with ways of looking, because things are empty, because perceptions are empty.

So this flexibility is both the path and a part of the goal. This is already something I said last night, but just to end, it's so important.

We can conceive the Dharma in different ways, and we're free to do that. For much of it, there's not really a right or wrong. It's hard to prove it. So very common nowadays may be that we conceive—that we've kind of heard over and over and formed a conception of the Dharma very loosely—that it's: Try to always be present because this is it. This is life. This is what we're with—this breeze on the cheek, this raisin in the mouth, this footstep, whatever. Try to always be present. You don't want to miss this reality of this moment. This is all there is, this sense experience. And as well as that, try not to cling, try to let go, because everything's impermanent, everything's flowing and changing. So try not to cling and try to let go. And then try to be kind.

Those three aspects might be our sort of loose conception of the Dharma. Or we might have a different conception, as mentioned, that's more influenced by streams like the Advaita tradition, where the goal is always to be in a sense of oneness—all is one—or there is no self, no self is occurring.

Or, as I said, what I would say, what I want to encourage more vision on this retreat is that these—all of those, being present, being in a sense of oneness, the perception of oneness—all of these are modes. They're modes of awareness, modes of sensitivity. They're ways of looking. They're temporary options. And we have a flexibility to move between them and many, many more than that.

Dharma, as I said, is the practice of this flexibility of modes of awareness, of modes of sensitivity, of ways

of looking. So that a multiplicity, a range of perception, of experience is available to us as a sense, not as an intellectual idea. We actually sense all the different possibilities for us. We see them, we witness them, we experience them.

Included in this range of these modes of ways of sensitivity, of awareness, this range of ways of looking—included in that, as part of that range, as a subset, if you like—are types and modes and degrees of less clinging. So less clinging in this way or that way, to this degree, to that degree, very deeply. That's included in that.

All this together opens up the possibilities of perception, the perceptual possibilities, and all of it shows us the emptiness of what we perceive, the emptiness of things, selves and things. That brings more and more freedom to the degree that we understand that emptiness in the heart, in the being. It opens up, it allows us even more flexibility with the perceptual possibilities—the way we perceive the self, the way we perceive others, the way we perceive things and the world and the cosmos. In a way, there's a kind of infinite range to that.

So this whole central teaching of the Buddha of not clinging—of clinging being a cause of suffering and being central in the Four Noble Truths—it's not so much that that's a way of living, trying to live without clinging, but non-clinging, what it really offers us is a range of ways of looking. There are lots of different ways of not clinging. Lots of different modes of that.

In the range of ways of looking, it includes going with the flow, being present, resting in awareness, if you know people that talk about that. Many, many more, many ways of looking.

So here on this retreat, we're also practicing this flexibility, this malleability, this multiplicity and extension of the range of ways of looking, modes of awareness, not just one approach, one track. And part of that—part of that included in that flexibility, as I said—is playing with the very view and the conception regarding images. That's a central thread or possibility of a way of looking and what forms ways of looking in imaginal practice.

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