What is an 'Image'? (Part 1)

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 1:18:05

I'd like to talk about what we really mean—at least what I mean—when I use words like image, fantasy, mythos. What's included in that meaning, what an image is, and particularly the kinds of direction, inclination, or way of relating that I'm most interested in exploring. I want to begin to fill that out and shape it a little.

In the opening talk, I enumerated a list of relatively familiar uses of the imagination in life and practice that many of you will be familiar with or at least have heard of. There's really a range in how imagination gets used in different instances or by different people in certain practices.

Just to reiterate briefly, there is the whole use of imagination for visioning—whether it's visioning the future of a retreat center like Gaia House and where it wants to be in twenty years' time, or visioning a zero-carbon future for society. There's the use of the imagination in the contemplation of death and the contemplation of the body parts that the Buddha teaches in the mindfulness discourse, the *Satipatthana Sutta*. There's the use of imagination taking any object that may not have any significance at all—like a candle or a stone or anything else—and looking at it and then visualizing it internally just for the purposes of quieting the mind, gathering the focus for developing concentration.

Then there's the use of the imagination in practices like metta or compassion, where we imagine in some way the so-called benefactor or friend or neutral person. We imagine this person as the image of them, and it's really just an aid—the imagination there is just an aid to cultivating this quality in our heart, so that it's got an object and we can direct the metta. That way our heart's quality of metta is cultivated, is nourished through that practice using the imagination.

There's also the use of an image of, say, Kuan Yin or Jesus or Mary or Tara—could be anything, some kind of figure or deity. What's happening there, or a big part of what's happening, is we hold that image in the imagination and it starts to resonate with the qualities of compassion, let's say if it's Kuan Yin or Jesus. In that way, those qualities—those same qualities that that deity or figure embodies, manifests, expresses—get empowered in our heart. So oftentimes the imagination is used for that purpose in that direction.

Then there are instances in the Pali Canon where the Buddha recommends a practice called recollection of the Buddha, which again involves imagination. That can bring inspiration when there's lack of inspiration or energy when there's lack of energy. So it's serving that purpose.

Some of you will be familiar with using an image or a memory to trigger feelings of well-being, feelings of

joy or happiness even, or energy in the body. People often use that as a little trick when they're doing samadhi practice, and it's completely fine. The image then can be let go of in those instances once the feeling of well-being, rapture, or happiness is established a little bit—that becomes the focus. So the image is just a stepping stone to something else.

There's also a possibility of using the imagination to come into dialogue with, for example, the inner critic, the superego, some critical inner character—letting it constellate as an image, as an imaginal figure. This can be very fruitful to work with that kind of oppressive inner psychic structure.

Just as an aside—I've mentioned this in other talks and retreats—we tend to think that dialoguing with images and having relationships with imaginal figures will make us crazy. Psychologists who actually investigate this stuff find it's the opposite. They find people who suffer, say, from schizophrenia or psychotic delusions tend to have vague imaginal presences which they don't actually relate to, and rather they turn away from. Similarly with the inner critic—oftentimes we're turning away from the inner critic rather than turning towards it and establishing, entering into relationship.

The craziness, if we can even use that word, or the mental disturbance comes more from not being in relationship, from turning away from relationship, from the vagueness, the lack of sensitivity and feeling out of the relationship. The healing comes through actually turning towards and relating and entering into relationship with an imaginal figure.

Then there are other psychotherapeutically functioning images of all kinds that might help support one's personal growth and personal healing—for example, in Gestalt psychology or psychosynthesis and other modern psychotherapeutic traditions. And then there's a whole realm of extrasensory perception and so forth.

All of that is very fine, and in a way we're open to all of that here—you're using all of that as much or as little as you like.

We made the point as well in the opening talk, just to repeat it again, that always in any of those cases—in each and any of those cases—there's always a conception, a way of conceiving of the images that's involved. So for example, with the candle, as I said, it's just insignificant what it actually is, for the most part, or stone or whatever. In the visioning of Gaia House's future, we're talking about something very practical—that's part of the conception. Or in contemplating death, we're talking about this material decay, and so on.

There's a great range in the conceiving of images, and there's always conceiving involved. Always included in that conceiving is the direction and purpose and the particular kinds of use of the image. So that's a general fundamental point that's really important to realize.

Again, we make the point that we are free to conceive and use images however we want, really. Certainly on this retreat, I'm open to most things. But we have freedom there.

Now, what I really want to expand on and fill out for us is: what do we mean on this retreat? What do I mean when I use words like image, fantasy, mythos? What do I include in the meaning of those words when I use them, or predominantly when I use them? Because, to be honest, like many words, I will use them sloppily at times and more precisely at others. But this is really what I mean, mostly.

So what I include in that meaning, and also the particular inclination that I'm most interested in developing—this is what I'm really interested in, in relationship.

There are quite a few aspects here. Let's just start.

If you recall the imagination exercise we did briefly this afternoon, I hope that one of the conclusions you realized from that was that an image, as I might use that word, is not necessarily visual. This is absolutely fundamental.

It's not necessarily visual. It may be, and that's fine, but it may not be. So it may be aural. It may be that the image is predominantly or includes something that we hear. We hear a voice in the inner ear, so to speak, in the imagination. And we perhaps even dialogue, so it's maybe entirely aural or partly aural, auditory.

Some people, many people in fact, as the meditation deepens for them, as the mind becomes a bit more still, they start to hear a kind of high-pitched, buzzing sound. This has different names in different traditions. Some people call it the nāda sound, which nāda just means sound in Sanskrit, so it's a sound sound, the nāda sound. People give it no significance at all or give it great cosmic spiritual significance or something in between. Some people are irritated by it; some people love it. You can use it in different ways, but one of the ways which is possible is actually to, when this sound arises—or if it arises, it doesn't arise for everyone—one option is actually to deliberately hear it as, for example, the compassion of the cosmic Buddhas and bodhisattvas.

This is someone who was practicing loving-kindness and compassion, someone for whom that sort of language and that sort of conception or image, they were very comfortable with that. And then this sound was arising. I suggested, well, you could hear this sound, which as it goes on feels like it's actually permeating—doesn't actually feel like it's originating in the head. The sense of it is that it permeates the air, the atmosphere, the space. And so in that case there's a deliberately incorporating that sound and deliberately hearing it as the compassion, the pervasive cosmic compassion of the Buddhas and the cosmic bodhisattvas. So the sound itself becomes an image. It was just a sound before and we were hearing it this way or that way or irritating or not interested or whatever, but potentially we can have a different relationship with it where it becomes an image in the sense that I mean it, because it becomes imbued with meaning and depth and resonance.

So the sound, a pure sound if you like, or just a simple sound, becomes an image of that pervasive compassion. So it doesn't have to be visual. It could be aural predominantly or partly.

It could also be mostly in the body. The image is not visual, not aural, but mostly in the body. Now sometimes we're putting a lot of emphasis on the energy body, and sometimes that energy body can feel, for example, that it fills with energy, fills with power. A feeling, an energetic feeling of power comes into the energy body. And then an image from that body sense can come, but it's more a body sense image—for example, of a powerful animal or a wrathful deity or a demonic figure from some kind of cosmology or something that might not be seen. It's more felt. The body actually feels its way into the inside of that powerful animal or deity.

So I remember some time ago, I was actually doing walking meditation on the lawn, and a series of images where this tiger appeared. Now it was partly visual in this case, but predominantly it had a very different dominant sense to it. This tiger was by its nature a very sensuous creature. It had a very direct, sensuous relationship with its own body. And I sort of entered into that tiger and its bodily experience. Rather than the vision being the primary modality there, the body was the primary sense modality.

This tiger was very sensuous, very much enjoying its body, its heaviness, its strength, its slowness, its power. There was pleasure in that, in the sense of its body, even the way it rested on the thick trunk of a tree was oozing this enjoyment of the sensuousness of its body. I was really entering into that, and it wasn't really strong or vivid as an image, but I stayed with it and it developed gradually over time.

Then actually—it's interesting that I did because it had two other chapters to it—one was it started to eat my intestines and devour my entrails, which felt incredibly healing. So there was a kind of—instead of me being identified with the tiger, it then approached me and ate my intestines, which was wonderful and very healing feeling. And then later, which I won't really go into now but may come back to, it's as if that quality of physical sensuousness then started to inform and imbue my perception of nature in a very particular way. So I don't mean the sense of the breeze on the cheek or the step of the bare feet on the grass or whatever. I actually mean sensuous in a more erotic sense. But we'll come back to that perhaps later.

The point is really that the image was predominantly a body sense of sensuality, and also that it developed.

Sometimes an image is not even any kind of sense object of any of the five senses at all. This is quite interesting and perhaps quite common. So it doesn't have to be sight, sound, smell, taste, touch necessarily.

I had a dream some time ago. In the last portion of this dream, I was playing a grand piano outside somewhere in a war-torn country. And there was a big wall. The piano was next to the wall, twenty, twenty-five feet high. And I could tell that the wall was about to be bombed by an aircraft—drop a bomb or missiles at it or something. But I was playing this music, and there was this feeling, despite the impending bombing, that it's really okay because of the music. And there was this absolutely beautiful music. I don't know what it was. I'd never heard it before.

The psyche is so creative from its depths to conjure the most extraordinary beauty. And this music was filling the space—beautiful, beautiful music. It's okay that the wall will be bombed and maybe I will even die there because there was music. And somehow this music, in a strange sort of dreamlike fashion, had a physical directionality to it, like a kind of jagged arrow in the direction I was supposed to follow anyway, the physical direction. And being bombed or being burned or even dying, it was okay. And then the words came in the dream: because it's the music that matters.

And that really touched me. It's the music that matters, matters more than anything else.

So I took that image, and I worked with it in the meditation in the morning. It's not really a visual image. It wasn't really—it sort of peeled itself away, the image. It's the music that matters. That phrase became kind of pregnant with meaning and depth and resonances, peeled itself away from the visual images of the dream, peeled itself also away from the music, the specific music of the dream, the auditory. So it was not a visual image, it was not even a particularly aural image at that point, but more going into this sense of music, music mattering, and something about that.

What is it? What was music? Hard to put your finger on or totally describe in words. It's a symbol, an image, and a lot to do with beauty. The symbol here of music that came alive and had so much depth had to do with beauty, had to do with a sense almost of life as music, and a sense of, with it, a devotional sense of aligning, devoting, letting go into that, devoting my life to that—life as beauty, as music, this mystery, that being the important thing.

The devotion to that, the loving that, the expressing that, also communicating that to others—this music. I don't mean just literal music. I mean this music and everything that that means symbolically: beauty and more. It's impossible to fully express, but prioritizing that, aligning with it, devoting to it, letting go into it, communicating, expressing it.

That was so beautiful and rich and pregnant and deep as an image that did not really belong to any of the five senses. It was a symbol that was very alive, very, very, very meaningful and soulful.

But all of this is really to make the point for imaginal practice that when images come, we need to notice what is the primary or the dominant sense avenue of this image for me, and actually to trust that. So if it feels like it's primarily auditory or through the body or whatever, however I know or perceive that image, I trust that. I trust the primary. I notice and I trust the primary or the dominant sense avenue.

And again, perhaps it was clear from the little exercise we did this afternoon, it's not necessary for the sensual detail of the sensory detail of the image to be that clear. And maybe that's important in some instances, but the kind of pixel resolution or whatever it's called on computer screens—that's actually not that important often. Often, sometimes it is, but usually it's not.

And sometimes it's not even necessary that it's a clear, defined object. The image sense is very, very potent and very deep and meaningful without actually crystallizing or constellating as a clear object. This is the

image. I see that image as an object or I hear it as a sound object or whatever. So really, as I said, what I want to include in the word image is something broader than certainly just a visual object.

And then secondly, it's not necessary, as again, probably clear from many of the examples, it's not necessary that we dialogue with images. So sometimes some people are familiar with work in therapy, etc., where you dialogue with images. It's not necessary at all. I mean, it may—an image may involve or invite dialogue. And that's interesting.

Sometimes that dialogue seems to happen at a sort of normal pace that one would normally dialogue with someone. Sometimes it happens even slow enough that a person can even write the dialogue down as it's happening. So it may involve dialogue. It may be in that kind of way. Sometimes it involves dialogue, I find, and other people find. Sometimes it involves dialogue, but it's a sort of intuited dialogue. You couldn't possibly write it down that fast, and you couldn't possibly even speak that fast. It's just we intuit what this imaginal figure is saying to us in our response, etc.

So it may involve dialogue, or it may not. An image may not. It does not have to. Are you assuming, perhaps, that it's better if it does? So that's an interesting assumption: I assume that it's better if I can dialogue with this image. And maybe I even assume that the longer the dialogue, the better. Or better even if the image just gives a monologue to me, just imparts its wisdom as a sort of very wise speech, and I absorb that and listen.

So maybe all these things are possible, but we must be careful of our assumptions around that, or at least notice what assumptions we're carrying. Ibn Arabi, the great Islamic mystic, sage, and scholar from the 12th century, spoke specifically about the kind of images that interested him. He said they do not answer in articulated speech, because then their discourse would be other than their essence, other than their person. No—their apparition, their coming, is identical to their discourse. It is their discourse itself, and the discourse is their visible presence.

Here Ibn Arabi emphasizes the visible, though we don't have to limit ourselves to that. His point is that dialogue actually shouldn't be there, because the image itself is what needs to be expressed. The image doesn't come to express something extra—it is the expression. So we can remain broader in our approach: sometimes there's dialogue, sometimes there isn't. It doesn't have to be verbal, and it can happen in different ways.

It's really important to understand—and I hope the examples make this clear—that other ways of interacting, apart from verbal dialogue, may be more appropriate than conversation. Instead of talking or listening to an image, it may be that the flow of love, or even the flow of eros, some kind of sexual interaction or connection with the image, is much more appropriate than verbal dialogue. We need to expand our sense of what is included in imaginal work.

One quality that's really key for me when I use these words—image, fantasy, mythos—is soulfulness. The

image has or feeds or nourishes within us a quality of soulfulness. I'm going to devote a whole talk to what I mean by that and its importance, but for now, let's say soulfulness means resonances—the energetic, emotional, psychological resonances of that image in our being. The image is pregnant with these resonances. It's full of meaningfulness, pregnant with meaningfulness—and I use that word deliberately, in contradistinction to simply "meaning."

I don't mean the image means X or means Y. I mean it's full of meaningfulness—a sense of meaningfulness that I can't quite box in or explain or get to the bottom of. This meaningfulness carries multiple resonances. We're touched. There's a sense of beauty, which is also part of soulfulness. There's depth, enchantment. All this is characteristic of soulfulness, which itself is characteristic of images in the way I want to use that word—image, mythos, fantasy.

Understanding, then—feeling like I fully understand this image—is not necessary. Sometimes a person doesn't feel like they understand at all, yet something is touched, deeply touched. There's a deep sense of beauty or enchantment or meaningfulness even without understanding. The resonances are there, the soulfulness is there.

Also, an image is not understood concretely, in the sense that I mean image. We're not taking them concretely. I once was talking many years ago to a woman who was actually an evangelical Christian, but very lovely. We were talking, and she mentioned that she had seen God's cloak, his majestic cloak, in her prayers the day before. But there was something in the way she was talking about it that made me feel she was taking this really concretely—that actually, somewhere, there was a God and he had this cloak and it was exactly as she had seen it. There was some sense that she wasn't quite understanding that this is imaginal reality, and that's different than concrete reality.

So in my use of the word image, I don't mean that they be taken concretely or literally. An image of a warrior, which has been very common for me, or an image of a wanderer, a solitary wanderer—again, very common in the past—doesn't literally translate. I would never join the army. I haven't hit anyone since early childhood. That's not somewhere I go. The image is not literal instruction to become a warrior or to go wandering or traveling. It's not a literal image.

Images, in the sense I'm using that word, are metaphorical, but more than what the word metaphor has come to mean for us—because that word has shrunken a little. I mean it even bigger than what metaphor usually means. We don't decipher images. An image is not a cipher to be deciphered, to be explained, reduced to "it means this."

Rather, that's what it represents. Something here moves more akin to poetic image, and I don't think the most powerful poetic images are images to be deciphered—puzzles where we exclaim, "Ah, I figured it out, this code!" That represents a poor poetic image. Such images lack depth, pregnancy, and the inexhaustible quality that makes them truly alive.

Poetry that genuinely touches us, that stays with us and remains powerful in its effects, lives within the psyche. It stays alive partly because it resists reduction—because we don't reduce it to "it means this" or "it represents that." There's a beautiful poem I love by Rumi that begins: "Come to the orchard in spring. There is light and wine and sweethearts in the pomegranate flowers."

For me, at least in the way I relate to that line of poetry—and this subjectivity is important because working with images is deeply personal—the orchard, the light, the wine, the pomegranates, the flowers are not signs for spiritual facts. They don't function as a code where the light represents this, the wine represents bliss, and the pomegranate flowers represent some aspect of the divine. They're not signs for spiritual facts, nor are they merely material. In the way I relate to these words, Rumi certainly isn't pointing to just a material level of appreciation for nature.

There's something more there that remains endlessly pregnant in that line of poetry. Something touches deeply in those images, resonates, and sets up multiple resonances. An image that's alive in this way, a poetic image that's alive for us, influences our perspectives and the way we encounter both material and spiritual things. The images influence our perspective on both the material and spiritual realms, but they don't necessarily represent other things or entities.

There's something about poetic images—which is really what I mean when I use the words image, mythos, or fantasy—that has a poetic quality: they remain open. They are ambiguous. We cannot figure them out completely. This proves crucial because the mystery of the image, its sense of not being completely decipherable, keeps it alive for us. It stays alive, works in the psyche, and maintains its resonance with vital energy.

The mystery of the poetic image, of the imaginal practice image, is part of what sustains its life. It remains alive also because of the fundamental importance of images for the psyche. The psyche needs images—this is vital for psychological well-being and part of what keeps images alive.

When I use the term "poetic image," this may or may not prove helpful, since poetry today encompasses such broad range and scope. Different poets and poetry readers relate very differently to what they consider good or bad, what they seek in a poem, what poetry attempts to accomplish, or what poetry should be. Depending on your preferences, this may or may not illuminate what I'm getting at.

A poet like Philip Larkin approaches poetry, image, and seemingly life itself very differently than poets like T.S. Eliot, Pablo Neruda, or George Seferis. There's quite a range. But I hope you can sense something of what I mean by the poetic image, the poetic nature of image.

We can also speak of poetic truth. When Mary Oliver writes something like "my love for that poet is like a garden in my heart"—I can't remember the exact line—no one actually looks for soil and flowers in her heart. There's a poetic truth there that we recognize and resonate with, that moves us, even as we don't mistake it for something concretely real.

This soulfulness is centrally characteristic and fundamental to how I use the words image, mythos, and fantasy—this poetic nature of images that is metaphorical rather than literal, not concrete, ambiguous. Jung wrote that "genuine symbols"—he uses the word symbol here, but in this instance he means the same thing as image—"genuine images, genuine symbols, are ambiguous, full of half-glimpsed meanings, and in the last resort, inexhaustible."

That's exactly the characteristic I'm pointing toward. We can make another distinction along these lines...

Some images or fantasies are what we could call narrative in distinct contradistinction to these more poetic images or what I would call iconic images. So there are narrative images and iconic poetic images.

An iconic poetic image is not so much about the sequential unfolding of events—this happened, then that narrative unfolded in time. Sometimes an image comes and it just stays as it is, and there's a resonating with that. It doesn't really go anywhere; it doesn't evolve in time very much at all. Or if it does, it's not so much in its temporal evolution that there's a kind of causal implication: this happened, and therefore that happened; or because this happened, that happened; this happened first, and because of that, that happened. There's not this causal implication in the narrative.

This non-sequentiality, this non-narrative, non-causally implicating quality in time is characteristic of more iconic poetic images. There's a kind of timelessness to them.

Usually we tend to read or view our own life in terms of causal implications. I'll get back to this later in the retreat, but with a different sensibility regarding images and their more timeless, atemporal, eternal qualities, this can also begin to come into the way we read and view and see our life as image as well—not just in the usual narrative sense and usual causally implicating sense.

So iconic poetic images have this timeless quality to them, in contrast to narrative images. And there's something in these images that's bigger than just the purely personal or the purely historical. They're not necessarily historical at all. Sometimes we may feel like the history of our life is mirroring the images rather than the other way around—the image mirroring the history. Again, this kind of shift, this 180-degree turn in the way we're seeing life in images, is part of the fruit, part of the beautiful, mysterious fruit that can come from imaginal practice as I'm wanting to incline it.

With these iconic, poetic kinds of images, there's this timelessness, this quality that's very personal but more than the personal, more than the historical, not necessarily historical. And there's a depth to them, and they feel fertile, and they seem to have a kind of intentionality. There's something they want. This is something I'm going to come back to in a whole separate talk. And there's a feeling of necessity—some necessity. This image, I may not understand it at all, but it feels necessary somehow. It feels right.

Not to make narrative images wrong and poetic images right, but we are leaning toward the more iconic poetic style rather than narrative. Actually, it's a spectrum—more or less narrative or non-narrative. There's a spectrum there.

Part of what this implies is that images we have in imaginal practice may not necessarily be very eventful or dramatic. As I said, sometimes not much happens at all, and one's just with a certain image, resonating with that and the sense of the beauty and complexity of that, the richness of it for the soul.

When I first started exploring imaginal practice some years ago, for I don't know how long, the images were incredibly eventful. This happened, and then we moved here, and then this wizard appeared, and then we slayed a dragon—rich in some ways. But as things evolved, actually a lot less eventful and yet much richer. A lot less dramatic in some ways for some of the images, but more soulful.

And with that too, an image doesn't have to be really far out—like, wow, that's amazing, wow, that's so strange. I remember some years ago practicing imaginal practice when a very striking image came. It was a sort of empty courtyard, a square courtyard of a monastery, a large courtyard empty except for four black-robed figures with their black monastic robes and black hoods over their heads so you couldn't see their faces. They were pallbearers carrying on a stretcher between them—these four monks carrying on a stretcher between them an open coffin. In the coffin was a dead baby, and from this dead baby's head a tree was growing.

If you describe it, it's like, wow, that's an intense image. And it had a certain intensity to it, I suppose. You would say, oh, it looks like a Tarkovsky film or something. But in a way, it didn't really have much resonance in my soul. Maybe in the future it will come back again or something. But it was a kind of far-out image without really much soulfulness to it.

Compare that with an image I had much more recently. Just on the theme of trees, it was a low-branched, black bark tree, not very tall but quite wide, the height of a person, completely leafless and pitch black, as if it had been burnt or charred—but I don't think it had. And although it has no leaves and looks black and leafless, there's nothing actually wrong with it, was the sense.

And sometimes that did actually grow from my prone body, my body lying down, sometimes from the body of a close friend, and sometimes from neither, just in the ground. And I was saying, "I don't understand this at all," but somehow it was making me extraordinarily happy. There was a lot of joy from this tree, or in relationship to this tree. And it's just there. I and others in the image visited it just to be around this tree. It was like a pilgrimage. We tended to the tree and watered it, but actually it didn't even need watering—it was part of our devotion.

So less striking as an image than that dead body, dead baby with the tree growing out of its head, but the second image was much more, felt richer for the soul. Maybe an image is far out and has a striking narrative structure to it, but there's not much soulfulness coming out of it. That's not really necessarily what we're interested in. The far outness can be far out, or it cannot be far out. It can be narrative or not, but it's really the quality of soulfulness I'm going to emphasize in other talks. That's what we're after.

I remember a lovely image from a couple of years ago in meditation—this very silent white horse gently

approached me. It moves its head the way horses do. It wants to get my attention, but not for its sake. It wants to get my attention for my sake somehow. And it wants me to go with it. It wants to carry me. It wants for me to be carried and to travel with it somehow, somewhere.

There's such a sense of profound beauty somehow in this image, and of intimacy. There's real love there. Such exquisite, tender, compassionate love, actually both ways—from the horse to me and from me to the horse. Tenderness and peace suffuse my being from this love and from that relating. And somehow this horse was supporting in some very subtle way. I got a sense of support. It was giving me a certain kind of strength, I couldn't even quite say what.

But it was clear this horse doesn't represent this or that, although it did seem to have certain qualities. It was imbued with certain qualities. It seemed to embody, for example, a certain kind of bravery, this horse. Very humble and not in your face, and also doggedness, persistence. It was not flashy, though I was aware, I had the intuition, that this horse was capable of great speed, great power, and very powerful sexuality as well. But the bravery had nothing to do with gaining glory or anything like that in the human sense.

And then at one point he became a magical flying horse and took me on his back and was flying, and I stretched my arms out wide. It was like a crucifix pose almost, and very, very open. Flying through vast space, everything became translucent. That's a bit more far out, that bit. But there's such beauty and depth and soulfulness just in that initial part of the image. Those kinds of qualities are really what I'm wanting to emphasize.

So again, it doesn't really represent anything, but it's in the relating, the love. That's what felt important there. It's not an allegory, it's not reducible to some simple meaning or definable as this or that. It's the presence of that image, the character, the quality, the intimacy, the contact and the love. And also the interest. This horse was somehow interested in me, this beautiful silent white horse, and I was interested in it. And it's those qualities in the relating that make for the soulfulness.

There's narrative versus iconic or poetic images, and that's an important distinction or spectrum. There's also another spectrum that's significant—we're open to the whole range of it—and that is what we might call the spectrum of substantiality of an image. Some images appear very insubstantial. They're almost like made of light, the characters. They're very, not even airy, just energetic or light bodies or luminous, very ethereal. And some other images have a much more earthy, solid sense to them.

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So there's narrative versus iconic or poetic images, and that's an important distinction or spectrum. There's also another spectrum that's significant, but we're open to the whole range of it, and that is what we might call the spectrum of substantiality of an image.

Some images appear very insubstantial. They're almost like made of light, the characters. They're very ethereal—not even airy, just energetic or light bodies, luminous and very insubstantial. Other images have

a much more earthy, solid sense to them. All of that is available to us and all of it is good. But just to notice where an image is on that spectrum—we may come back to that aspect.

It's good to point out here that most images need repeating. Occasionally there's an image that really has a big impact, but it's just a one-off. One student told me there was actually an image of me. I was already alive for her as an image for a while, but then there was a particular image of me approaching her. In this image, my head was exploding, and through the explosion of my head, it was actually really transformative in terms of the freedom and the sense of liberation that came with that and stayed for quite a while—stayed at a certain level in her being after that.

But mostly, images need repeating. They're not just one-offs. We come back to them, we resonate with them, we stew with them, we invite them back. What's happening here is small movements, cumulative movements through practicing with an image. Gradually a different sensibility happens, not just through one image, but through whatever images come up. Through repeating and repeating, gradually a different sensibility emerges.

As I alluded to in the opening talk, gradually a different conception as well as sensibility develops—a sensibility and conception of practice, of self, of life, of the world. Somehow through this repeating and stewing and resonating and dwelling with and feeling and being sensitive to, a different sensibility and a different conception of practice, self, life and world unfolds.

There's a question here, and that's really, to me, what's the most important thing: allowing or opening to this different sensibility and these different possibilities of conceiving and perceiving self, life, world, and Dharma.

Wrapped up in that are questions about pacing—whether we just have this image and then move to another one. Usually, as I said, we want to dwell, we really want to dwell with an image when it's there and really focus on it. We're not just drifting with images and daydreaming. We focus with an image, but there's also a question of going back to an image, like coming back to a piece of music that you love and dwelling in the whole vibe and all the resonances that music brings for you.

We don't just—this is something Thomas Moore said, and we'll come back to it—we don't just listen to a piece of music and say, "I've listened to that before, I don't need to listen to it again." If you love it, you want to listen to it again. You want to be in that atmosphere of that music and what it evokes and what it brings up and what it does—the magic of the music, the magic of the image.

So most images need repeating. It's also important to point out that images don't only arise in meditation—they don't necessarily arise in meditation. Images can arise actually anywhere at any time, and that's different from having a hallucination. I hope that's clear. A hallucination means I can't actually tell what's what—what's an image and what's concrete solid reality. We're not talking about hallucination, but it's quite possible that images arise not only in meditation but anywhere at any time.

One person was telling me that they were actually listening to a public lecture in a hall. She found this lecture rather stupid and a little bit offensive, in fact, what the person was saying. Yet it seemed to her that all the people around her—and in fact, she was correct in this assumption—most of the people around her seemed to think it was absolutely brilliant and wise. So she was in this situation where she felt that it was quite stupid and a bit offensive and differing from the opinion of those around her.

Then an image that had arisen for her before of a phoenix—a very powerful, beautiful bird that had multiple resonances and came in different situations—suddenly this phoenix came as she was listening to this lecture, and it filled the room. Enormous size it was, this huge phoenix filling this large hall, magnificent, she said, and completely untroubled by the stupidity of what she was hearing—these are her words. She said this phoenix was so magnificent, it didn't condescend to scrap with such folly. She said this phoenix shattered the hall with its sheer beauty.

This was very, very vividly, intensely, powerfully present as she was sitting there listening with her eyes open—so silent this phoenix, majestic, noble, immovable and dignified. Not in silent meditation with the eyes closed. Actually, that's an image I'm going to return to for another reason later on in the retreat. But the point here is that images don't necessarily arise only in meditation. They can arise anytime.

Let's make another distinction—an image, a little more subtle now, a little more involved. An image may or may not have what we might call archetypal or mythic dimensions to it. This is a little bit more involved. What do we mean here? You get more archetypal, mythic kind of images, if you like, or that have that quality, that dimensionality, that aspect, that depth to them, and ones that are not.

As an example of a non-archetypal image that was still incredibly potent and incredibly healing, I'll tell you a story that someone related to me. By the way, with all these sharings of other people's images, I always ask the person if they're okay with their image or their story being shared—I would never just go ahead and share something without asking.

This was in an interview some years ago at Gaia House. The person was on a long personal retreat, work retreat and personal retreat mixture. Something happened in relation to the work, I think—I can't even quite remember what it was. But something happened, and it triggered for her feelings of guilt. She noticed, she could see, she recognized a pattern of a tendency to feel guilty in situations. Something would go wrong, and she would feel guilty.

Then she recounted to me—very moving in an interview—she recounted to me that many years ago, many years before this, she got pregnant by her husband, but she didn't tell him immediately because he had been diagnosed as being infertile, unable to father children.

She found herself pregnant by her husband but chose not to tell him immediately, knowing he had been diagnosed as infertile. This diagnosis had painfully ended his previous marriage, and she wanted to be sensitive about it. She also didn't want to raise his hopes only to disappoint him if the pregnancy

miscarried, as she wasn't yet ten or twelve weeks along.

Then one morning, as they lay in bed, she wanted to make love, and they did. This made him a little late leaving the house. As he prepared to go, she wanted to tell him, "Drive carefully because we need you"—meaning herself and the baby in her womb. But she didn't speak those words.

He had a habit of driving fast anyway, and being later than usual that morning, he drove too fast. He got into an accident. The police and witnesses later said it was his fault—he was driving too fast. He was killed.

This student was absolutely heartbroken and felt unable to mother the child on her own. She decided to have an abortion. That decision, along with the feeling that she had delayed him and failed to say "drive carefully," brought painful guilt that remained with her for years.

Then one day in meditation—she was doing predominantly metta practice at that point—she spoke to the baby, the one that was aborted. She told the baby she was sorry and hoped it would find a loving mother and father. She explained that she had wanted to spare it the pain of not having a father, which was how she herself had grown up after her father died when she was just two.

In the image, the child responded to her with great love, telling her that while it felt sad about what happened, it was okay and at peace. This was profoundly significant for her.

Later, in a different session perhaps the next day or a few days later, she thought to herself, "What if I had spoken those words out loud to my husband?" Spontaneously in the image, he turned back and came to her, and they had an intimate, deep conversation.

Later still, the image of him arose spontaneously—joyously, happily getting into his, in her words, "fizzy cabriolet sports car." She was trying to do metta practice and attempted to return to the metta phrases, but then decided to give attention and sensitivity to that image of her husband getting into the car and having their conversation. This was incredibly helpful and healing—very, very profoundly healing.

What is happening in an image like that? She was under no illusion that her husband and baby were alive. She certainly wasn't avoiding feelings—there had been plenty of grief, and she was comfortable with the grief. Yet somehow, this reimagining that occurred semi-spontaneously was mysteriously and deeply healing.

This is a beautiful and important example of what I would call a non-archetypal kind of image. Sometimes there are images that are somewhat ambiguous. For example, with the subtle body, the energy body, there may be an image of that body being on fire, of fire shooting from various energy centers or from the hands, or the image of the body roaring. In itself, that's not necessarily archetypal, but it could easily move toward archetypal images—fire and roaring and great power. It could shift in that direction very easily.

Other images—for instance, that solitary wanderer or the warrior image I've alluded to on different

occasions—people often say these are archetypal images. There's an archetypal image of the wanderer or the warrior. But what does that word really mean when we use it?

I want to explore this a little. Jung, who originated the psychological usage of this term, wrote: "Archetypes are typical forms of behavior which naturally present themselves as ideas and images. By way of these effects, we discover that they have an organizing influence on the contents of consciousness."

The word archetype comes from the Greek, meaning something like "first molded" or "original"—like when you make a lithograph print or some kind of print in art. It's the first form, and then there are copies of that original.

So literally it means something like that.

But what's characteristic of the way Jung means it, uses that word, is that rather than being itself an image, an archetype is not an image in his usage. It's rather what shapes images and shapes ideas. It's a shaper of images and a shaper, a former of images and ideas, rather than itself being a specific shape or form. And what that means is that an archetype, in his usage, archetypes are actually not directly knowable. You never actually encounter an archetype. It's just the sort of, as he puts it, the organizing structure to shape this or that image or this or that behavior or this or that perspective or idea. So that's one aspect, at least of Jung's meaning of archetypes.

And another aspect is also to realize that archetypes interpenetrate. They're actually not separable. So this is also very, very important. And again, quoting Jung, he wrote: "The fact is that the single archetypes are not isolated from each other in the unconscious." Actually, we're going to steer away from using that word unconscious because I think it takes things in a certain direction. It has too much baggage for us and I want to not use it and allow things to open up in a different way.

But he writes anyway: "The fact is that the single archetypes are not isolated from each other, but are in a state of contamination of the most complete mutual interpenetration and interfusion." So they interpenetrate, they mix—you don't get one pure archetype.

Now, sometimes what's very common for people is a tendency to want a kind of neat classification, actually of all kinds of things: Dharma concepts, "this means that," and "what does this exact term mean when the Buddha uses it this way," and the links of dependent origination, but also in regard to archetypes. So the tendency to really want to define things very neatly and separate everything. Maybe that tendency itself is kind of archetypal. As Jung says, archetypes shape ideas, perspectives. So that wanting a neat classification, taxonomy of things is also potentially an archetype. I think it's very, very common, but it's a little bit mistaken somehow because they're always interacting, interpenetrating, mixing these archetypes.

But let's make a distinction. So for Jung, an archetype is something that's first. It's kind of primordial. It has its roots in the dawning of humanity and pre-consciousness evolving into consciousness. And it's

dawning in our biological evolution and all that, partly. There's something first or primordial in time about it.

So compare that meaning with James Hillman's sort of twist on the term, if you like, or evolution of the term. And here it's more that we sort of decide to view an image, if you like. "Decide" is maybe too strong a word, but we orient towards an image and view it as archetypal. So there's an adjective rather than archetype. We view an image as archetypal. And this is saying something more about the image, about its value, rather than its origins, if you like, in misty time or something like that. So we view an image as archetypal.

Listen to this phrase. James Hillman writes: "Any image termed archetypal is immediately valued as universal, transhistorical, basically profound, generative, highly intentional, and necessary." I'll read that again—it's quite a dense sentence. Any image termed archetypal is immediately valued—so it's about value, and "immediate" means without anything coming between—immediately valued in the actual sense of the image itself, immediately valued as universal. It's what I said before: it's beyond purely personal. It doesn't just apply to me. It's transhistorical. It's beyond time. It doesn't have its roots in history. It doesn't correlate necessarily to coming from something historical in my personal history or otherwise.

Basically profound. We're giving it some kind of sense of it's fundamental in the psyche and deep—its roots are deep, basically profound. Generative means that it generates, as I said. It generates ideas, perspectives, emotions, other images, attitudes, all that. It's generative of all kinds of things. It's highly intentional. This is what I alluded to earlier. It wants something. It has a direction for us. And it's necessary, he says. There's this sense of necessity to the image when it has this archetypal sense to it.

In other words, or elaborating on that a little bit, it's the relationship with the image, the love from and to and in the whole image that's part of its archetypal nature.

There's a sense of blessing that comes often with images we see as archetypal. Some kind of blessedness or blessing with them, to them. They seem to make a demand of us, and I'm going to talk much more about that aspect of demand. And they seem to open us up. Archetypal implies something's opening us up to, we could say, other dimensions of our being, beyond just the ones that we're usually conscious of. There's something giving us, opening us up to a sense of our own depth, or let's put it better—the depth of the psyche.

Wrapped up in this meaning of archetypal as an adjective is what I alluded to earlier. It's when we see something in life or an event in life or a thread in our life or an image, and we see that experience as archetypal. In a way we're placing it in a kind of cosmology with regard to—let's use the word gods, but I want to explain more what I mean by that, both cosmology and gods and what that might mean. But there's a sense of another dimension or depth to it, and we're placing it in a larger cosmology of significance, of meaningfulness, of beauty, of place. It has place and depth in that place.

Now, this might sound perplexing at this point. I'm hopefully going to talk more about it on this retreat, but there's something in that that's very alive. It's not abstract and it's not clunky. We'll come back to it later. It's not some kind of abstract philosophical idea. It's a sense as well.

That's certainly not something we can prove. In fact, none of this is stuff we can prove. It would be impossible to prove that. Impossible to prove that the image actually makes demands of me of some kind that I'll go into more. Impossible certainly to prove this other cosmology involving what we could label in quotation marks almost "gods." But we sense somehow this archetypal value, these qualities imbuing certain images, and that makes them archetypal. So we sense this as part of the soulfulness, part of the texture of the image. Not so much the sensual texture, but the meaningfulness, soul texture of the image. We sense an image's archetypal value.

But, and I really want to emphasize this, we're also recognizing that we are giving it that archetypal value. So there's no truth claim here. To me, this is quite a sophisticated philosophical point. I can sense an image's archetypal value, and I will in all these different ways that I've just elaborated, but I'm also recognizing in a way that I'm giving it that value. That archetypal value of an image, that archetypal quality or characteristics of relating to it, the psyche's relationship to it.

So all this implies that the view, the way of relating, the way of looking at an image is actually included in what we mean by the word image. You understand? Image actually includes, in the way that I mean the word image, a certain way of relating to it that gives it this archetypal value and then senses that archetypal value in it. But I recognize, oh, I'm giving it that. The mind is giving it that. You understand? It's not inherently, independently existing. It's still empty. It's still dependent arising. But in the word image, I'm including in that a certain way of relating, a way of looking, a certain view of it. And that's included in the very concept image, in the very idea of the image.

So when we talk about archetypes, the point of that word or archetypal, the point of that word and the value of it is not in categorizing—oh, it's this archetype or that archetype or analyzing which archetype is this coming from. It's more emphasizing a way of looking or ways of looking that give value, certainly, or find or sense, discover vitality, an aliveness to the image and what it does for us, that give and discover meaningfulness. And again, that doesn't mean meaning. Meaningfulness, vitality, depth, divinity, if we dare use that word, and I'll expand on what we possibly mean by that later on. Vitality, meaning, depth, divinity—in short, ways of looking that are soul-making. I'll explain what I mean by that tomorrow, hopefully. I want to fill that word out.

So that's the point and the value of using words like archetypal. It's pointing to ways of looking, relationships that open up another depth and richness and dimension for the soul, for the psyche.

So with all of that, we are open to all of this. But for the purposes of this retreat, what I want to emphasize more, what we're more interested in is the more iconic, poetic end of things—those kind of images that are like icons or more poetic as opposed to narrative, and more archetypal in the way that I just outlined,

that have more soulfulness to them.

And that's partly why I was ambivalent about the exercise earlier in the afternoon. While it may be a good exercise for some people, much of what emerged probably didn't carry much soulfulness within it.

What we're more interested in cultivating are iconic images—poetic, archetypal, soulful images that carry that deeper resonance and meaning.

So let's pause here for a while, otherwise it becomes too much to take in all at once. We'll continue exploring these themes in a little while, allowing what we've touched upon to settle and find its place within our understanding.

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