Opening, Tuning, and Relating to the Imaginal: Instructions (2)

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 1:15:41

I hope that it's obvious that in imaginal practice we're really talking about mindfulness of images—bringing mindfulness to bear on images and everything associated with those images or other certain aspects of experience associated with them.

We're not talking about daydreaming, about being lost in fantasy, about not being present. So I hope that's obvious, but sometimes I find that it isn't obvious to some people. Partly that's just because, as I mentioned in the opening talk, this culture is so used to regarding images a certain way. And also sometimes some people are very used to having quite a narrow range of view of what meditation is and what practice is, what it means to be present. So hopefully it's obvious—we're really talking about mindfulness of images or mindfulness with images.

So that means we want to explore now what's included, incorporated into that mindfulness in imaginal practice. What we're talking about is steadily attending to an image, holding an image in attention rather than flitting from one image to another the way the mind does and the attention does when we are lost in daydreaming and not really present. So as much as possible, just as with the breath or something like that, we're steadily attending to, holding in the attention, an image. And when the mind gets distracted, we notice that just as with other practices, and we return to the image. Gently—you don't have to force this, don't have to get too tight, just as with working skillfully with the breath or the metta practice.

As we are holding an image and attending to it in this more steady way, it might want to evolve. The image might morph or change its form, or something else might be added to the image—some other character or something like that. So we let it evolve if it wants. But the attention is really on this image, which either stays relatively the same or evolves in some way or other.

With all this, there's a lot of mindfulness. Actually, it's asking quite a lot of our mindfulness. There's mindfulness of the body, and particularly, as we said, of the energy body—we've really put a lot of emphasis on that. There's mindfulness of the image. And there's mindfulness that it is an image—knowing image as image, as I keep emphasizing. The mindfulness of body, of the image, knowing that it is an image.

There's mindfulness of our reactions and our responses and what happens, so to speak, in response to this image or with this image. So the thoughts that arise in response or reaction to the image, the views of the image, or in response to the image—sometimes they'll be very explicit. We notice that the mind is thinking or viewing in a certain way, and oftentimes it's more implicit. Even this awareness of the implicit view of

the image and what the image is or what it might mean or what it's worth—all this, even that is included in our mindfulness. It's a mindfulness of view in relation to the image.

Noticing the associations we might have with something in our life or events or trajectories or meaningfulnesses in our life. Really, a sensitivity is required here with the mindfulness—sensitivity to the resonances of energy, of emotion, to the qualities involved in the image and attending to it, opening and tuning to those qualities perhaps, to those energies, to those emotions, sensitive to the vedanā, the pleasantness or unpleasantness, or neither pleasantness nor unpleasantness—so-called neutrality. So we're aware of all this, sensitive to all that. How is the self-sense in relation to this image? Or how is the self-sense right now while I'm attending to this image? All this is part of the mindfulness and part of the sensitivity.

So it's very different than daydreaming or being lost. We could say we're attending, we're tuning, and we're opening to the imaginal through the mindfulness. Attending, tuning, and opening.

So let's break that down a little bit more and elaborate a little bit more. Here's another list—a seven-point list—just to give you a sense. Some of it's very intuitive and obvious anyway, and some of it may not be. But to give you, to fill out the sense of what's really involved in this practice in terms of nuts and bolts.

So the first one is—and we've touched on this before—how do I sense the image right now? In other words, like we said, what is the primary sense modality? Not to elevate necessarily the visual sense. It could be auditory, the aural. It could be the body sense, more kinesthetic. It could be even taste. So plenty of times something as strange as taste is a kind of knowing through the taste, or an imaginal taste, pregnant with all kinds of resonances.

So how do we sense the image? This is part of the attending, part of recognizing. How do we sense this image? And as I mentioned in one of the talks, maybe it's a more intuitive sense. It's not really one of the five inner senses or the inner correspondences of sight, sounds, smell, taste, touch.

Maybe it's more intuitive, not so much of the five senses. So it's really important to be flexible here, rather than getting stuck in one modality, one sense modality. How do we sense the image? And then trust that. Tune to whichever way of sensing the image—whichever sense or without the senses—is the most helpful to tune into with regard to this particular image that's going on right now. So that's the first on this list.

The second is, again, a bit of a question you can lightly ask: Does the image want to fill out at all? For instance, here's an imaginal figure right now coming to me. Where is this imaginal figure? What are the surroundings like? What's the imaginal territory, so to speak, that they are arising in? Are there any other imaginal figures around, or are they alone?

Really, sometimes the image wants to fill out a little bit, and sometimes not so much. But just lightly asking the question, giving it a chance to fill out, asking certain questions about territory and whether there are others there.

And the third instruction, really, or aspect or dimension of attending, tuning, opening is: Is it possible to get, so to speak, a sense of this imaginal figure or imaginal object? A sense of its character, their character.

So, for example, I remember—I don't know when it was, maybe almost two years ago—it was, I think, a spring day, and I was invited to Totnes to meet two people, two women I didn't know at all, to do an interview. I actually didn't want to go, to be honest. I was too busy. I felt too busy, and I didn't want to go. But I went anyway, and we did some filming of each other, sort of a two-way interview, outside by the river. It was absolutely delightful. There was something about the interaction that was really a lot of fun and very lovely and very inspiring as well, listening to this woman speak. And also when I spoke, I felt a lot of inspiration flowing through.

Then the next day—and that sense of inspiration carried on—the next day in the morning meditation, the same scene arose in the imagination: the scene outside by the river, sitting on the bench with these two women, and even the other people around. The same scene arose, all the sunlight and the loveliness there. But in the background of the imaginal scene came, very spontaneously, the presence of a sort of angelic figure who had a body of golden white light. He had a masculine kind of presence, but his features were not clear, not at all visually clear.

What was clear was the particular quality of flavor or resonance of his presence—somehow very clear and very defined, very, very particular, even though visually it wasn't that clear. And that quality of presence, or the flavor of his presence... it may be very hard to put into words. I would struggle. There was something about joy very much, and about love that was there. But even the quality of love was not obvious. It wasn't the first thing or aspect that one was struck by. But there was something all-encompassing and delightful and bright in there.

Somehow the presence of this angelic figure in the imaginal sort of memory afterwards—this spontaneous image that came—somehow his presence was very connected to and in a way responsible for what I said or the spirit that seemed to imbue how I responded to the questions that were being asked of me. And at the same time, this angelic figure was also pervading the two women who were with us during these interviews, pervading our delight and pervading the enjoyment of each other, and even the scene itself. So his presence was pervading the grass, the bench, the trees, the river, the sunlight. It wasn't separate from all that.

In the sense of the image, as I dwelt with it more and more, everything became luminous. That pervasion of this beautiful light and joy and love pervaded the whole scene. And there was a kind of transubstantiation—if we borrow that word from the Catholic tradition—transubstantiation of all the elements of the scene, all the material and psychic elements of the scene. It's different than a transfiguration, where something changes what it is or changes its shape. Everything retained its same form, but its substance was different. The whole world and the beings that were there.

In the imaginal practice, I noticed a little bit of a tendency to want—oh, let's talk to him, let's learn

something from him. But I could sense, oh, that's not quite right. Just focusing on this figure and his presence and the pervasion and the resonances there, that felt really right somehow, really wonderful and joyful and beautiful.

So with this third aspect of what we can check out with images, there's sensing into the character of the figure, the resonances of that figure and the character of the figure. And especially if there's any complexity of character...

So, for example, in this one, with the example I just gave, the love was there, but it wasn't the most obvious thing. But when you noticed it, then you realize, oh, there's a profound and pervasive love here. It wasn't obvious at first. Sometimes you might get images where the imaginal figure actually seems quite crusty and kind of not very loving at all. One might think even the opposite. But there's a complexity of character to many imaginal figures. So one might see, for example, that here's a kind of crustiness, but underneath, or with that, or looking more closely, there's great love. Great love is there, but it's not obvious.

So with all this, another aspect of that is really the instruction to be sensitive to the nuances of character of an image—not, as we mentioned before, just, "Oh, that's the wonder archetype," and just stick a label on and kind of lose the sensitivity, lose the attention and the curiosity and the openness to the more subtle manifestations of character and resonance. So really, really encouraging the sensitivity.

And this third dimension of the practice, we could actually broaden it to say not just what is the sense of this character, but let's broaden that to, again, ask lightly a question in the imaginal practice: What is the specificity that is important in this image or to this image? What is the specificity that is important in this image? In other words, what is it that I want to be really tuning into here that's important about the image and important to really tune into that specific aspect with a lot of attention and differentiation and nuance and detail?

Different images have different aspects of them that are what is most important, if you like. For example, once, actually quite a few times, sometimes I might be meditating, for example, and there's a sense—if you like, an imaginal sense—that comes of the birdsong that I can hear. Perhaps I'm outside or perhaps I can hear it through the window. And the birdsong is heard through the imaginal lens, imagined as sacred text. The birdsong in this moment that I'm perceiving is perceived as somehow as a sacred text.

Now, partly saying that, I'm aware, I'm thinking, what do you mean by that? And that's what I want to explain—that the vagueness in some ways is part of it. Now, I may well have read something about sacred texts or something in this tradition or that tradition beforehand, and so there's a kind of suggestibility there of the psyche that's open to certain suggestions that then have fruition in images. No problem at all. No problem whatsoever. If that's the case and you recognize that's probably the case and then think, "Oh, but that's probably because I read this thing or I heard so-and-so say something," no problem. Again, the psyche is creative. It's how it works, how it takes in something from its environment and then creates

something or allows an imaginal sense of something.

So there was a recognition that was possibly connected to things I had read in the not-too-distant past. And there was a sense of samadhi with it. But more important, there was a depth and a beauty to this sense, listening to the birdsong and the whole bodily sense, and a sort of inexhaustible depth and beauty to this particular imaginal window or imaginally mediated hearing opening to the birdsong as sacred text.

What was very specific, and this is what I want to get at—what was the specificity that was important in this image? One aspect of that was very specific resonances emotionally to that whole sense of the birdsong as sacred text. And more important, it was a very specific way of seeing, of knowing the world. The world that opened up at that point, the world outside my window, the world that I was in had very particular kind of resonances and feeling tone and sort of sense of its depth, particular kinds of that and its beauty.

Now, I may not have, certainly may not have been able to articulate that. It would be very, very difficult to put that into words. But it was really those aspects—the world quality, the resonances, the kind of beauty, the kind of depth—they were very, very specific and precise and beautiful, difficult as they were to describe.

Other aspects of the image, or that whole opening, were really—it did not seem important that they were specifically tuned into. Those specifics were not so important. So, for example, the exact relationship of this birdsong and the text. What do you mean, certain pitches or sounds? No, it didn't matter exactly. The relation of the birdsong and the text and the body and the energy body and nature itself, the exact relationships there were not important. Probably, in fact almost certainly, they wouldn't have made sense in a tight rational framework. And in a way, they were not clear, they were not defined, they were more vague.

Was this text a Sanskrit text or a Pali text or an Aramaic text or a Hebrew text? It didn't matter. It was something, and I'll return to this later, something actually needed to be a little vague and open and not so defined in this image. And other aspects, their specificity was very important. The tradition—what tradition are we talking about in this sacred text belonging to what tradition? It was not important. It did not matter.

So the question here, gently, is to tune into, see if you can get a feel with any image:

Again, what is the specificity that is important in this image, whatever it is? This forms the third question—the third thread or aspect of instruction. We're exploring the sense of this figure or imaginal object, its character, and the particular specificity that matters most in this image.

The fourth aspect—our fourth encouragement within this mindfulness of image—concerns the emotional resonances and resonances in the energy body that an image sets up or evokes. There's quite a lot to say about this dimension of practice.

We could describe two extremes regarding these energetic and emotional resonances. At one extreme, it's possible to exclusively tune into and focus on the sense data of an image—really examining the particularities, the specific fine details of a visual image, concentrating purely on the sensual aspects and trying to achieve maximum clarity and precision. However, here on this retreat, we are not pursuing that extreme. This approach, while valid, is not what I wish to emphasize.

We are always connecting with the emotional resonances and the energy body resonances. There's never an exclusive tuning into the sensual detail of an image at the exclusion of awareness of emotional sensitivity and energetic body resonances.

The other extreme might involve focusing exclusively on the emotion or energy that arises with an image. Perhaps an image brings tremendous love or joy, or creates a certain quality of softening in the energy body. One could choose to tune increasingly into that emotion or energy in the energy body, giving exclusive attention to the emotion as emotion or the energy as energy, while letting the image recede.

This approach will take us deeper in the samadhi direction. The samadhi will constellate more and more, creating the quietening of the emotional body that we discussed in earlier instructions. This extreme is certainly an option on this retreat—it's a choice, a kind of leaning or steering where we recognize something happening and consciously move toward the emotion or energy exclusively as we let the image fade.

Most often, though, we'll practice something in between: focusing on the image while remaining aware of the emotional resonances and energy resonances in the energy body. This ongoing sensitivity to emotional and energetic resonances is crucial in imaginal practice because it helps us navigate.

This sensitivity helps us recognize when an image is "right"—right in the sense that it nourishes, deepens, opens, and supports soulfulness and soul-making. I'll speak much more fully about what I mean by soulfulness and soul-making, but within the framework I wish to support, this constitutes the rightness of an image. One of the primary ways we recognize that an image is right and moving in that direction is through its effects on the energy body. The energy body tells us: this image is helpful for soul-making; there's something important here for the psyche.

Several effects signal that an image is right. These are not separate possibilities but interconnected qualities. The first is a kind of alignment of the vertical axis of energy through the body, through the energy body. There's a sense of the energy coming into vertical alignment within the energy body. This can be very subtle, but it's a signal that we're on the right track—the energy body is telling us we're moving in the right direction with whatever image is arising.

When this alignment of the vertical axis becomes very strong, it tends toward the emotions of reverence, devotion, and prayerfulness. These qualities are intimately connected to this energetic alignment.

When it's very strong, those emotions are often not far away at all.

But this felt alignment of the vertical axis in the energy body is one of the cues and clues, if you like, that we're on the right track. A second is just the sense that the energy body kind of opens and expands a little bit. That sense of the expansion of energy, the widening of energy, is also very characteristic as a cue and clue that we're on the right track.

Third can be a kind of softening of the energy body. I don't certainly just mean a relaxing of the physical musculature—that may happen, but again, I'm really talking about energy body rather more than anatomical body. The texture, if you like, or the tone of that energy body can soften to one degree or another. It doesn't mean a slumping—there's still the uprightness there—but the softness, the texture feels like it's got more softness in it. Something softens. This can be very, very subtle or stronger, but it can be very, very subtle.

Fourth is, generally speaking, the energizing of the energy body. When an image is, again, so to speak, right for the psyche, for the soul, the energy body will feel energized very often. Now that energization can be, again, very, very subtle or very, very strong. There's a whole range there of possibility. It's not that one is better or worse, or that stronger is better. It's just a range there. But energization is often a key aspect of what happens in the energy body when an image is important.

With the energization, this energization can bring or reflect a feeling of power, vitality, force into the whole being, into the energy body, but into the whole psyche as well. It brings or reflects a feeling of power, of vitality, of force. That may fill the energy body, and that whole movement may—it doesn't have to, but it may—fill the whole energy body. It may wave through. It may sometimes erupt very suddenly in the energy body and through even into the physical body so that sometimes the head moves or moves back, tilting upwards, a shudder moves through the body. Sometimes the mouth opens by itself spontaneously and it's almost as if a silent roar comes out at times.

These kinds of things are absolutely not necessary. So again, don't regard them as super advanced or better practice. I'm just mentioning them so that one is not freaked out or alarmed or disturbed by their occurrence. They're absolutely not necessary, though. Just to say that one of the aspects that can happen is energization. Sometimes it's strong and sometimes that waves or erupts through the physical body to the extent that for a moment or two it affects the physical body in different ways. But it's absolutely not necessary that that happens. So it may or may not. Neither better nor worse. But the fourth possibility to look out for is this energizing—to notice and to feel.

The fifth—these are all, as I said, not totally separate; they're related, but it's worth differentiating them—the fifth is that there's some degree of increase in the sense of well-being in the energy body or even bliss. Again, this can be very, very strong or really quite subtle, not that remarkable, but there is some degree of an increase in well-being and bliss that's often characteristic of an image being right or soulful. So it could be very, very subtle.

But what we're doing here is really trusting the energy body rather than the mind's initial mental reaction

or view or thought that might be actually a little bit too tight about what's a right image or wrong image, or what kind of image I need, or what's okay and what's not okay and what's weird and what's not. We're actually trusting more the energy body and the manifestations in the energy body, the cues and the clues there. We're trusting that for the navigation more than the mind and its views, which are often just received and habituated from different cultures that we move in.

The sixth is a possibility through the energy body, something to look out for, notice and feel—a kind of harmonization and homogenization of the whole energy field, the whole energy space of the energy body. Harmonization—it feels more harmonized and it feels more homogenized. So the energy feels like it's spread more evenly through the energy body, oftentimes, or can do. But that also includes a homogenization of the awareness through the space of the energy body.

In other words, so often—perhaps it's our culture, perhaps it's just normal—it's very common to feel like the awareness is somehow in the head, looking at the body, or sometimes that they're even separate. There's this sort of awareness located here, and the body is more than that somehow. But one thing that's characteristic here, a possibility, is this harmonization, homogenization of the energy, but also of the awareness through the space of the energy body. So that generally speaking, the body and the awareness are less fragmented, and also the connection between them feels less disjointed, less fragmented.

And a seventh possibility that I think is maybe more common for some people or some people with certain backgrounds in practice is that the contoured energy body can be felt. So remember we talked briefly about that earlier in the retreat. It's not so much this amorphous space right now, but one might also feel and sometimes even see or feel an energy body, separate in space, distinct in space from the physical location of one sitting on the cushion or the chair meditating. And that contoured energy body, this body of light or energy, is felt—actually felt, not just seen, this is important—felt as perhaps dancing or flying or somersaulting with or in response to this image that is occurring. So this image, this imaginal figure is opening up so much energy and such a powerful response that the energy body itself is felt to be moving in space.

Okay, and a sixth possibility that I think is perhaps more common for some people, particularly those with certain backgrounds in practice, is that the contoured energy body can be felt.

Remember we talked briefly about this earlier in the retreat. It's not so much this amorphous space right now, but one might also feel and sometimes even see or sense an energy body, separate in space, distinct in space from the physical location of one sitting on the cushion or chair meditating. And that contoured energy body—this body of light or energy—is felt, actually felt, not just seen (this is important), felt as perhaps dancing or flying or somersaulting with or in response to the image that is occurring.

So this image, this imaginal figure is opening up so much energy and such inspiration of emotion that we become aware of the contoured energy body, and it's felt—as I said, it's dancing, flying, somersaulting, or manifesting all kinds of possibilities—in a distinct location from the location of the physical body.

Separate from the physical body, but absolutely crucial: it's felt, it's felt, it's felt.

Sometimes, either hearing about that or experiencing something like that, people get a little nervous and think, "Well, am I disconnecting? Am I disconnected from my body? Am I ungrounded?" And they get a little suspicious or nervous even. But no, it's absolutely not disconnected, that kind of experience. It's not ungrounded as long as we feel it. So it's feeling two energy bodies at once, or a mixture. There's this one sitting here, and in this energy body I somehow feel this contoured energy body, as I said, flying or turning somersaults or dancing or whatever it is. It's not ungrounded, it's not disconnected as long as it's felt.

So there are seven possible manifestations to look out for, without needing to make a big deal of any of them or judging, "Oh, this is good and that's bad, that's better, that's worse"—any of that. Just things to look out for.

With any of these possibilities may come—or rather, often implicit in them—the sense that the energy body at that time has within it very specific qualities of emotion or energy. If we want to say frequencies, frequencies of energy (if we use that term), these are present within the energy body. I may not have a word—again, I may not have a word—for this particular quality of energy or this particular frequency, but any of these seven possibilities I just went through can sometimes imply that, or it's noticeable.

And then it's really important to notice: what is... can I really feel, can I really taste this very specific quality or frequency of energies, or mix of qualities or energies? Really make sure we notice, really taste and feel, open to it perhaps, let it pervade the whole space perhaps. Bathe in it, focus on it, enjoy it as we mentioned before.

So attuning to those energetic qualities, lingering in them, dwelling with them, entering into them, opening to them—all that. To the degree that we lean into that lingering and dwelling and entering into them, to the degree that we lean that way and incline that way, will, as we've already mentioned, allow us to enter more and more into samādhi.

So you can see there's a kind of very fluid navigation here in terms of image and energy and where we incline the whole consciousness and energy at any time. But what's absolutely crucial to the navigation is the noticing of what's happening in the energy body. And then we can decide where we incline and sort of glide with the consciousness and the whole energy body.

There's one thing I should maybe also mention right now. Generally speaking, all this is much, much easier in a meditative posture, as we emphasized at the beginning with the uprightness and the awakeness manifesting in the physical body, with the openness and receptivity and softness there. And so the meditative posture really allows both the sensitivity of mindfulness to the images, but especially even more the sensitivity of mindfulness in relationship to the energy body and working with the energy body. So generally that's a really good idea in the kind of work that we're doing and emphasizing on this course.

But sometimes one will find, occasionally one finds that posture is not right for this image. So not too long ago, someone was telling me they were working with an image—actually it was an image that had been around quite a lot—of a bird that this image had opened up for them. And there was a lot of beauty and preciousness associated with this beautiful image of a bird. And there were the corresponding meaningfulnesses in life that were very important in terms of openness and sensitivity and beauty and lots of other things.

And then something happened actually in life, and then that was mirrored in the image, and this bird was then perceived as having a broken wing and as dying from this injury. So I was talking with this person in an interview about this and pointing out this timeless quality of images. I said, "This bird is going to die, it will die." And we put that into, very normally and very understandably, a temporal context. "It's not dead now, but it's dying, and then it will die, and then it will be dead, and then what? I'll be without this bird, or this will have disappeared, or whatever it is."

But actually, there's a timeless quality to images that we can tune into—I might say more about this later on. So in a way, the bird is dying rather than "it will die at some point." It's always timelessly in the state that it's in now, wounded with a broken wing. That's not going anywhere as a narrative. So that helped enormously. It's almost like feeling into that image at another level, outside of time—and this is really, really crucial.

The person was working with the image, and after we had that conversation, then in the meditation they noticed, "Actually, it's working a little bit, but there's something wrong here." And they were playing with different postures. And then they actually found when they went to their room and lay down on their bed and curled around—curled their body lying down around this bird, this wounded bird—they said, "That's the perfect posture for the image right there."

Actually, just to continue a little bit because there are some other important learnings here. So not only was it the case that in this instance the meditative posture was not quite right (this is rare), but also then they noticed that they're lying, their body curled around this wounded bird with the broken wing. And then they noticed, as they were meditating in that way, bringing all the sensitivity, they noticed that they were scared to look into the bird's eyes, into this little bird's eyes, scared to see the suffering that they anticipated seeing there.

But she brought herself to look into the bird's eyes and then, very surprised, saw the love that was there in the bird's eyes.

These bird's eyes were radiating love—wide open, the love was wide and steady. This was very surprising, given her fear of actually doing that and what she anticipated seeing.

This points to something important about the autonomy that images have. They are autonomous—they're not just necessary parts of us, nor do we control them as much as we might think. So many times we're

surprised by these imaginal figures. It doesn't mean they're completely independent of us—remember, they're not independent of the way of looking—but they have a certain autonomy.

The main point there was about posture. Usually the meditative posture is the best, but we want to be sensitive and open-minded there.

Those were all possible cues and clues, signals that we're on the right track—that this image is right, despite how weird it might seem. They come through the energy body, through manifestations in the energy body. Now, I'm aware that this might reflect my bias or inclination, because my modality is more kinesthetic than visual. So I'm certainly open to other cues or signals that a person might receive. Sometimes people get a light that appears, telling them they're on the right track with an image. There are many possibilities, but this inclusion of the energy body as a thread and basis allows so much other possibility in meditation. If that can be incorporated, it's really important and helpful. There might be other cues in other sensory domains as well for different people.

So there's the inclusion of energetic resonances in the energy body, and also in this fourth aspect of mindfulness, the inclusion of emotional resonances. As we've said, an image may often—not always, but often—contain within it, be pregnant with, or reflect multiple emotions. It's not just one emotion, but quite subtle shades or many aspects emotionally going on at once. Images are often quite condensed, rich, multidimensional in many respects—even multidimensionally and multi-aspected emotionally.

In the mindfulness, one is aware of the emotional resonances, which might be plural and have very subtle shades of the image or with the image. With this richness, again to reiterate, it may not be necessary to spend hours with an image, or certainly not necessary to go on some journey through imaginal space or territories. It may be that a brief image in one location, meditatively, is very rich. It might take one a long time to articulate all that richness, all that multidimensionality and the resonances emotionally, energetically, and all that. It may take a long time to articulate that verbally, even if one were able to, even from a brief image that's rich in that way.

That's the fourth aspect of mindfulness here: the sensitivity and awareness of, and also navigating possibilities regarding, the emotional resonances and energy body resonances.

Then a fifth aspect of what's included in the mindfulness relates to thoughts, reactions, and views. We've talked a little about this, but let me spell it out in more detail. Careful—it depends on the conceptual framework, but for our purposes, or for what I regard as the most interesting direction here—careful of the temptation to seek advice from an image. We think, "Oh great, then this person can tell me what to do in my life." I'm going to return to this point, but notice if the orientation or stance to an image is, "Ah, here's my fairy godmother, or here's the wise old sage who's going to tell me what to do in this situation in my life."

For our purposes, generally speaking, we're more interested in the resonances. That's much more

interesting than getting advice and using it for the sake of the ego and the ego's journey.

Also notice and take a little care—just notice if there's a tendency to want to reduce this image in your view. The conceptual frame might be implicit, not obvious, but notice the tendency to reduce it to "it's just a result of my history, what happened to me in childhood or something else from the past." It's not that this is wrong at all. Sometimes, of course, an image does come from that—it's very related to that. All these things—our history, the image, and our unfolding—mirror each other in a more complex way than simple causality would allow us to conceive. But just notice if there's a tendency in the view to reduce it to just something, a result of history.

Or to view it purely literally: "Oh, it means this, or it means exactly what it looks like. This wanderer means go wandering." Or to reduce it in the sense that "it represents metta, or it represents my strength" or some other psychological concept or force. We're boxing it in, shrinking all the complexity and multidimensionality that's in an image, shrinking it into some concept, whether it's a dharma concept or psychological concept or whatever. Notice if that tendency arises and just take a little care with that. Again, it's not wrong—it's just that it might not be that interesting in terms of what then unfolds.

Similarly, regarding thoughts, reactions, and views, take care that we're not harboring a view that the more outlandish the image, the better—the more far out. Some of these things can sound really amazing when we relate them to others or to ourselves, but that's not necessarily important.

What's much more important is the relationship with the image. Everything hinges on the relationship. The relationship is what matters more than anything else. That includes the sensitivity to the resonances we've spoken about—in emotion, in the energy body, and in the psychic resonances, the soul resonances, the resonances for the soul in terms of meaningfulness. That's what matters—the relationship with the image, not actually what the image is itself.

When working with images in meditation, it's perfectly acceptable for some light reflection to emerge around the conceptuality of what an image is, or around the framework itself. Sometimes a bit of intellectual conceiving, some reflection or gentle chewing over of ideas naturally arises. While we often hear in meditation that thinking is terrible or that we must get away from the intellect entirely, this isn't necessarily the case here.

Certainly we don't want to be merely thinking—that's not the point at all. But at times, this shifting of conceptual framework happens through some light thought, or thoughts simply arise in relationship to our whole way of conceiving. This can be genuinely fruitful. So don't automatically slam the door shut on this process. Again, it's part of learning to navigate. You can sometimes allow that element in, and sometimes have less of it.

As we mentioned before, notice if the mental reaction tends to assign an image or imaginal figure to a particular character type, making a kind of stereotype out of it. "Oh, that's the warrior," or whatever it

might be. This approach will kill the aliveness of the image entirely. What we truly want is to let this image, to allow it, to give it enough respect that it can really be alive. It's not just an instance of a category. It's not something to be labeled, causing us to lose our sensitivity and relationship to it.

In a way, this points to the importance of keeping our practice playful and responsive. This quality is crucial in meditation generally, but perhaps even more so in imaginal practice. I might offer lists of seven things to try, or mention other elements to look out for—one, two, three, four, five, whatever it might be. Fine, that's all useful. But fundamentally, these are just pointers. It's much better if you can really allow yourself to improvise with all this.

Rather than regarding the practice as formulaic, learn to be playful, to be responsive, to try different things. You may discover—and I hope you do—ways of working that I haven't suggested, that you haven't heard me describe, or that perhaps I haven't even encountered myself. That would be wonderful.

Regarding this fifth aspect of mindfulness about thoughts, reactions, and views, let me reiterate: the conceptual framework, the view, the way of looking always makes a difference to what occurs, what's allowed to occur, and how it unfolds. There's tremendous power contained in the conceptual framework, the view, the way of looking. This really makes a profound difference.

The sixth aspect of mindfulness, or possible thread here—something I'll speak much more about, perhaps tomorrow—involves asking the image: What do you want? In other words, what does this imaginal figure want?

This may not necessarily be a literal question. You don't actually have to speak these words aloud. Rather, it's about cultivating a particular attitude and orientation in relationship with the image. It's about turning around from "What can this image give me? What can I get from it? What can it do for me?" and reversing that stance entirely. I'll speak much more about this as we continue.

What do you want? Since this may not be literal, there may not be a verbal answer or anything of that nature. It's more about approaching the image and being open to sensing, perhaps, or intuiting some kind of intentionality behind this image—perhaps even a demand, something it wants, a meaningfulness that's wrapped up as part of the deeper meaningfulness contained within the image.

Of course, implied in having this kind of stance in relation to the image—asking it what it wants and honoring that response—is a quality of trust. Again, I'll speak more about this, but it implies that I trust in that moment. I'm entering into, encouraging, or adopting an attitude of trust in relation to this image. I trust it and I trust its intentionality and what it wants.

I'm trusting that it's benign, even though it might appear as some crazy warrior raging and bellowing fire, or something else entirely—perhaps a strangely erotic image or whatever it might be. I'm trusting it, and I'm trusting that it's benign, or better yet, benevolent. There's a beautiful etymology to benevolence: it wants what is good. Like well-wishing, it wants... These images are benevolent. Can I actually play with an

attitude of trusting them?

This trust helps me turn the stance around and ask: What do you want?

What this imaginal figure wants may simply be to be seen, to be known, to be witnessed. It may just want to be acknowledged, to be honored, to be given a place, to be respected and, yes, honored. Perhaps even more than this—maybe it wants its holiness and its sacredness to be seen, or even its necessity to be acknowledged. There can be all kinds of subtle aspects to what it wants. Or it may be something more than that, or something different entirely.

Maybe this imaginal figure wants to be expressed in some way in one's life. It wants that your life expresses this imaginal figure in some way. Now again, this doesn't necessarily—in fact, usually won't be—literal or concrete. Something can be expressed without anyone else having any sense of it sometimes, or without it having a literal correspondence with the image, and can be expressed without that being visible to anyone else or tangible to anyone else.

Sometimes, in fact quite often—and this is important—an imaginal figure that comes to us has a different perspective than the ego or than our normal perspective, either on ourselves or on things or the world or a situation or others. So they embody and express and have a different perspective than normal. This is actually the important aspect of the image, and this is what it's wanting to show us or wanting to initiate us into.

Obvious examples would be Quan Yin or Avalokiteshvara as the bodhisattva of compassion, who has a different perspective than the ego's normal perspective. It's a non-ego perspective of universal compassion, universal love. It's seeing through different eyes, and it wants us to know that and honor it and recognize it and wants us to enter into that, perhaps. So those would be more obvious manifestations of different perspectives. But there may be, for us, less obvious ones.

I've talked about my interest in opening the range of what is our usual emotional range, opening the range of our usual psychological range, opening the range of the self and its self-expression. Because images are different, are autonomous, we cannot just regard them as self. Opening to their different perspective, recognizing, honoring, getting a sense of the different perspective that any image might have also opens our range beyond the more tightly circumscribed usual range that we might have.

Again, in this very subtle questioning or stance—what do you want?—it may be that it's really about love, that the image is wanting to express or manifest or enter into or allow love in all kinds of different ways. It's more about the love, and we sense that's what it's wanting, with many different possibilities here.

It could be, for example, that we enter into an image and interact with the image—that that's what it wants. How? We can interact in all kinds of ways. It's not necessarily that dialogue is the appropriate way or the best way to interact with a particular image. And if it's more interaction that has to do with love, and if love is the sense that this is really the most important aspect going on, then again, we want the

sensitivity to the particular quality or kind of love. Because love has tremendous range—there are many different kinds of love and qualities of love. So what is the particular quality of the love that seems so central in this image and with this imaginal figure? It may be universal metta or compassion, but it may not be that. It may be much more personal and particular. There are all kinds of possibilities.

I remember not too long ago, I was doing walking meditation on the lawn here. I heard the bird song, beautiful bird song around me as I was walking outside. The bird song reminded me of one of my favorite jazz musicians, Eric Dolphy. He was active in the late fifties and early sixties before he died in 1964—a beautiful musician, quite associated with the avant-garde at that time. He played alto sax and bass clarinet and flute, really stretching the limits of jazz and the jazz vocabulary. Beautiful spirit, quite out there in his explorations and what was coming through him.

Hearing the bird song reminded me of Eric Dolphy. He used to take his flute to the oceanside in California and sit on the rocks and play with the birds. Different birds would be there near the ocean, singing, and he was such a virtuoso on the flute and improvising. He would mimic and play back and forth with the birds, and they would gather around him—a beautiful image in itself.

So I hear the bird song, I'm doing the walking, I hear the bird song and suddenly remember this story about Eric Dolphy playing with the birds. Then suddenly, very suddenly, I spontaneously imagine—it just comes as an image—that he's visiting from death. He's just visiting for a short time. We talk and I update him. This is not really happening in real time with a sort of concretized dialogue, but it's what's implicit. I update him a little because he played with John Coltrane and with another bass player, Charlie Mingus, in another band. I tell him a little—because they both died after him, John Coltrane not too long later—and I update him on that and how and when they died, and also on what people said about him, about Eric Dolphy, and how highly he is regarded, especially by so many musicians, by so many people. I think he wasn't really aware of that—he was a very humble person. So wanting to tell him that, wanting to communicate that to him.

At some point, perhaps I get the sense that our time is drawing to an end, that there's just a brief window and that he has to go back to the realm of death. I find myself just blurting out silently, asking, "Play something, will you play something?" I was moved to tears by this request of mine that just bubbles up and emerges—with it, the sense of the preciousness of his music, the beauty of it, and the preciousness of his playing. "Just play something, will you?"

To me, this was an interesting image.

The image revealed itself to be fundamentally about loving him. The love flowing from me to him was what felt most important, most central to this encounter. There was even a quality of wanting to care for him, to tend to him physically in the here and now.

What had actually happened in 1964 was that he was touring in Germany, working as a musician. He was

diabetic, and his blood sugar or insulin levels went dangerously wrong. From what I heard, when the ambulance came, because he was African-American and a jazz musician, they simply assumed he was overdosed on heroin and left him, saying, "Oh, he'll get over it." They didn't recognize that he was diabetic, and he went into a coma and died. I don't know how much of that story is exactly true, but certainly his condition wasn't properly recognized, and he died.

Partly because of this, the image carried this deep impulse in me to want to take care of him, as if he could have another life, another chance. Part of me wanted to tell him to wear a medical bracelet that said "diabetic" in different languages, in German. This sense of wanting to protect him, to care for him, was so central to the image—this loving him, and this immensely deep gratitude to him, for him, for what came through him, for that manifestation.

At one point, the love flowed the other way as well. He reached out in the image and touched my heart center with his hand, very gently placing his palm there. There was something about this gesture that reminded me of something Christ-like, or some kind of Near or Middle Eastern mystical blessing. The gesture was full of love and gentleness—really like a blessing. He was blessing me. Really, really beautiful and touching.

As this image unfolded—all of this happening in just a few minutes—occasionally I would get an impulse to ask him for advice. Perhaps advice for the past when I used to be a jazz musician, when someone like him, a complete master, could have helped me or at least sympathized with my passionate struggling to gain mastery. Or advice about creative work now, whatever.

But immediately when that attitude arose, I sensed that this wasn't the point of the image. It felt not right. That wouldn't be the proper steering, the right orientation—to ask for advice or whatever. The whole feel of it, when that impulse arose, the orientation of getting something from him, somehow felt off. Something was stuck or not quite alive. And that indicated to me very quickly: that's not right.

The simpler orientation—and to the mind perhaps more puzzling—of just loving him, just letting the gratitude flow forth, the flow going from me to him, that felt really, really right. There was something right about that, beautiful and right. What was really central in that image was the love, and particularly my loving him and my gratitude. Very beautiful and soul-making, if we use that word again.

So this sixth thread is about the stance, the attitude and relationship with the image: what do you want?

The seventh aspect or possibility in this mindful work with images involves what we could delineate as three possibilities in terms of stance with regard to the imaginal figure.

It can be that you, in the meditation, are beholding this figure or this angel. You're seeing or gazing at this figure and just feeling the resonances as you do that, stewing with that, cooking with that a little bit.

Or another possibility is that you enter into this figure or angel or daemon or whatever we want to call it,

and actually feel them from the inside, as if you identify with them. I hope I can find another word at some point because I don't mean the ego identifying in a tight way—I mean entering into, let's say.

There are actually some tricks, a few little techniques you can use. Sometimes this just happens naturally. Sometimes we simply intend it to happen. But gazing into their eyes sometimes helps in order to enter in. Sometimes imagining your energy body mimicking the movement in the body of the imaginal figure—so if they're dancing in a certain way, for instance, you imagine dancing or feel how it feels for them to dance in that way. Feel that in the energy body. This helps us enter.

And then curiously—I have no idea why this works—giving attention to the small of their back, attending to that and feeling the small of their back, entering into that in the imagination, also allows us to enter into them sometimes.

So there's the "I behold the angel, the daemon, the imaginal figure"—I look and gaze at them with the resonances. Or "I enter into them," into their body, into their experience, seeing through their eyes. Or I attend more to this feeling of being seen by this angel, by this imaginal figure or daemon. I really notice: oh, they are looking at me, they are gazing at me in a certain way. I'm seen by them, and I tune into how are they seeing me? How are they looking at me?

So that's a third possibility, and it could be a combination of all of these.

These are just some pointers that could be helpful—some of them indispensable, some of them just possibilities that are helpful within imaginal practice.

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