The Love and Demands of the Imaginal (Part 1)

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Hopefully it should be very clear by now that when we use a word like "image," I'm indicating something much more in scope than what might be indicated by a word like "metaphor." An image in the way that I'm using it is much more than a metaphor, at least the way we tend to use the word metaphor nowadays.

Looking up the word "metaphor" in my dictionary, it gives an example: "he is a lion in battle." But that kind of expression is not really an image so much as—you might as well say, "he's very ferocious when it comes to fighting." You could simply replace it with an adjective such as "ferocious." It's not an image in the way that I mostly want to indicate and open up the meaning of that word.

In the metaphor as used that way, there isn't the sense of aliveness that this image, this imaginal figure, has—some kind of life and autonomy of its own, some kind of reality, importance, depth and richness of its own being. There isn't what it fertilizes in the psyche in terms of meaningfulness, the love that can pass between the self and the imaginal figure, the sense of necessity and the demands that imaginal figures can seem to bring to us or offer to us. None of that is really there in a metaphor in the way that we usually use the word. So an image is much, much more than a metaphor.

Going into this a little further, what I want to explore and open out a bit more are these aspects of the imaginal: the aspects of love and necessity and demand from imaginal figures, the way they might love us, the way they might place demands on us or seem to. We use those words—love, necessity, demand—and we sense them as we're working with images in imaginal practice, on or off the cushion. We sense a demand, sense their love, sense the necessity of this imaginal figure or image.

We sense it, and as I've already said, we also acknowledge and recognize that it's sensed and it's given this sense. We give, through our way of looking, through the conceptual framework, we give the sense of demand to the image that we then feel from the image. In other words, the conceptual framework and the way of looking constellate the sense of the demand, of the love, of the necessity. We sense it and we know that it's given by the way of looking. It's never independent of the way of looking, of the conceptual framework. So we understand: yes, dependent arising; yes, empty.

But there's power there in that balance of understanding. We're not saying, "Ah, it's not real because I'm just making it up." Nor are we losing sight of the fact that it's a dependent arising, dependent on the mind, conceptual framework, way of looking. Right there in that middle way, there's a lot of power and aliveness without the concreteness and the literalizing and the tightening around fundamentalist beliefs around all this.

Again, I would say it's impossible to prove. How would you even begin to prove that this imaginal figure is, so to speak, really placing a demand on me or really loves me? We're not in the realm of the provable. We're not relating to this in terms of its reality status in the way that we would relate to a scientific reality. We're not approaching it in terms of propositions that are provable or not by experiment.

So the kind of truth, the kind of reality these images have are not scientific-style truths, scientific-style realities—at least classical science, pre-quantum. They're not even quantum-style truths or realities. It's more like art. The whole thing is more like art. We're not in the realm of the provable. We're entertaining conceptual frameworks and seeing what effects, what opens, what is given birth to, what is fertilized. Which direction do things go when I entertain this conceptual framework and entertain the idea of love and demand from imaginal figures?

As I said before, we can entertain different conceptual frameworks. We could entertain the idea, hold the conceptual framework in regard to an image, that this image represents this or that quality or aspect of being that is not yet available to myself—something that I haven't yet developed in myself or grown into. This quality, this psychological quality, will be helpful to me and balancing for me, balance out other qualities that are available to me or maybe are too strong. In a way, the image represents something that is for the growth of the self, the psychological or spiritual growth of the self. In that sense, they can be integrated.

Many contemporary psychologists would approach imaginal work with the imagination with that kind of conception. And it's really okay and fine. If that's what you feel comfortable with, go for it. But as I've also pointed out many times, there will be limits to that kind of view. It's a limited and limiting view if we only conceive of images that way. Certainly sometimes that's a perfectly helpful and appropriate way, but there are also other possibilities which to me are more radical and more interesting. So yes, fine to look at it that way, but it's not the only way. To regard things only that way would be limited and limiting.

Sometimes a spontaneous image arises for a person with loving demands, and those loving demands are clearly healing for the human self. There are so many examples I could share of that. The demand from the image is something that's clearly in the service of the human self and its growth.

Someone on retreat, quite a while ago now, a few years, was sharing something of their history and then what happened in their meditation. When they were a little girl in the early 1950s, they had a serious accident. They were in hospital for some weeks, strapped down immobile on the hospital bed. In the early fifties, the way the medical system worked, if a child was in hospital they would not let the parents visit. The parents were not allowed to visit her. She was very young, in hospital, strapped down, immobile on the bed.

Decades later, decades later in meditation here, she heard a voice, so to speak...

She was told to stand up from the meditation and then lie down. So she did that. And then the image or the

sense—it was a more kinesthetic sense rather than visual—the sense of someone untying, loosening and cutting her restraints, the restraints that were strapping her down on the bed. And it was both gentle, this undoing, and also forceful at times. Sometimes it was gentle, sometimes it was forceful. But there was a great sense of release in that, the release from being strapped down.

Very, very powerful. And then afterwards, sitting outside the meditation hall, sitting looking at the trees and the grass, there were tears. The healing was really flowing in her being, and tears were there. And an image of a baby held, protected, loved, peaceful, in a peaceful holding, totally content. And she stayed with that and the beauty of that image. She could actually feel and taste a drop of breast milk on her lips. So sweet, she said, so beautiful.

So here's an image very much related to a memory. And the demand—stand up, lie down—and then this undoing, very much on the dimension, if you like, of the human self and the healing of the human self of past wounding trauma.

To give another example, someone was relating to me that they were a long-term student of Thich Nhat Hanh and had exposure to him through film and meeting him and his teachings over the years, and felt the image of him and the felt sense of him. "I could feel it in my body," she said. But really, what was specific about this image, in this case of Thich Nhat Hanh, was the sense of his inner authority. That inner authority that he had in his being, coming out of his devotion and alignment—continual devotion and alignment over the years to what was important to him, what was deeply most important to him.

And that sense of his inner authority in the image, through the image, helped her to connect to hers. And with that was this sense of a loving demand, a sense of Thich Nhat Hanh expecting her—that was her word—expecting her to step into that authority for herself. The authority, if you like, over her mind and the authority over what is being chosen, what she chose to cultivate in the present moment: awakefulness, care, loving-kindness, aliveness. So this benign authority was constellated in the image of Thich Nhat Hanh with this loving demand from his image. And she felt that aspect, that loving demand work on her. It was doing something in her being and very, very helpful on her path.

So certainly sometimes the loving demands come from the images and they're operating very much for the growth of the human, if you like. But as I said, we need to be a bit careful here. Sometimes what happens is the ego, if we use that word, wants to make a demand of the image. So the demand is from me to the image.

Someone was sharing of this image of a tramp, and they could see that they weren't a tramp in their life at all, but they could see there was something of that outcast and the loneliness and the isolation and the being shut out and the being impoverished and the being looked down on and the disdain that they constellated as this image. And they could also see somehow the mirroring in their life of that.

The impulse—very understandable—of this man in relation to this image, who hadn't done a lot of

imaginal work, was actually, "Oh, well, let's invite that tramp into the..." There was an image: he's looking through a window onto a family gathering and it's all cozy and warm with the fire there. And he's outside looking in, something he's shut out of. Very understandable that the inclination was, "Let's let him in there, or let's give him a friend, or let's give him better clothes or something, bring him in from the cold."

Maybe that's important in a way, that movement, the movement of the demand from the self to the image at times. But yet, as he was telling me about this image, I was also struck by the fact that in the image of Christ, Christ is also something of a destitute, a wanderer, an outcast. There's something about the holiness of the image itself. Somehow in this tramp, maybe if I look deeper, I see Christ. And it doesn't need to suddenly then become shiny and radiant and clean—all the dirt off his clothes and his face. It's something in the complexity. The poor one, the outcast, the one looked down on, is the Christ, is the Holy One.

Very easily that's hard for the ego to understand. It's hard for the usual self to understand, especially when it's connected or one feels the pain of the mirroring of this image in one's life, and so I want things to be different. It's complex.

But really what I'm saying is, it's tricky here to be sensitive to what are the demands of the image and what are they serving? And if I make demands on the image, what is that serving and who is that serving and who is it healing? I don't think there's a right and a wrong here. And certainly talking with this person, I was very tentative. I didn't know; I was just voicing something really.

So yes, sometimes be careful of the demand from the self to the image. But it's tricky. And sometimes what happens is a person is in the image that's happening, that is going on, is themselves.

One sees oneself as an image or in an imaginal interaction in a constellation, but one has entered it so fully that one has actually become part of the image. The self-sense has become an imaginal self differently. And then the demand from that imaginal self is maybe not so much the usual self-ego demand.

As an example, someone was telling me not too long ago they were on a retreat where the teacher was leading a compassion guided meditation, offering as a possibility that one could use a figure like Avalokiteshvara or Quan Yin or Jesus and see them, imagine them as the source of the compassion. The teacher said at one point in this guided meditation, "If it feels okay, put this person, this deity or human person that's the source of the compassion, put them behind you in space so that they are radiating to you from behind. They're radiating that compassion to you from the direction behind."

For this person sharing with me, that image of Avalokiteshvara or Jesus behind soon became her lover. It was the image of her lover behind her. And then a lot of eros, an erotic charge, came into the whole image. And then her lover was entering her sexually. And then it took on a whole other level—then the lover was removing her skin. She said, like unzipping her skin and peeling her skin off and plunging his hands into her blood and her flesh and pulling her heart out and putting it in his mouth. She said this felt incredibly blissful, not grotesque or scary, but very, very blissful.

In that case she had become image herself, had entered into the image fully. So she said to her lover in the image, "Take me apart, take me apart," in this kind of physical erotic loving way. And the lover took out one of her eyes and then the other and placed them in his mouth. She was feeling that she was being emptied in this way. The lover was emptying her in this way—very blissful, very erotic. And that was happening from behind.

In front of her was the image of her brother and his suffering, and what she called his density—density of being in his suffering—in comparison with the bliss and the emptiness that she was feeling through this erotic compassion that was coming through. That bliss and emptiness came into contact with the suffering of her brother in the image, like a healing contact of compassion, as we've talked about. It's the contact, the putting in connection of the healing qualities with the suffering.

But there wasn't much conscious will going on. It was almost like this was just happening—this movement from behind with the eros suffusing the compassion and the emptying out and the bliss, and all that was coming into contact with the person suffering as a stream of compassion with a particular flavor.

There's a lot there actually in that image, and I hope in the not too distant future to talk much more about eros in relation to the imaginal. But really the point was that although sometimes we need to be careful of the demands of the self towards an image—if we still want to retain the soulfulness aspect, the soul-making aspect, as opposed to prioritizing the self-growth aspect—sometimes we need to be careful about the demands of the self to the image. But sometimes what happens is one sees oneself as image, or one is so much in the image that one can trust the demands and say, "Take me apart." That was the demand of the self: "Take me apart" to this lover and the eros of the situation, the holy fleshiness of the situation, erotic dismembering and emptying. One could, in that case, trust that demand of the self, because the self was so much part of the fabric of the image. It wasn't the usual self-stance.

Sometimes we feel or sense a demand from an image, from an imaginal figure, and it can feel like it's stretching us to accept that demand, to bow to it, to take it on. It feels like it stretches us. There's some kind of trial there. It involves maybe a trial, and there's the discomfort of being stretched and the trial of that.

Maybe the image and the imaginal figure, what's implicit there and the demand—or where they take us, or just being in contact with them—they take us beyond the circumference of the world that we know and the social scene that we know, or the dharma scene that we know, or the culture or community. Beyond that community's ideas and range of acceptable behavior and whole worldview. We might move on. The image is showing us something, pulling us towards something, and we're moving out, breaking through the circumference, the limits of that worldview and that culture and that community, moving on.

And so there might be, if that's the case—as it is in some cases—a kind of loneliness on the human or social level that comes out of the demand, or taking on or accepting the demand of an image.

Sometimes it's the opposite. It might be that actually something in this image is calling us in to more

relationship where we actually feel like that would be too much work or too much hassle, or "I don't really feel inclined to enter deeper into the community that way and take up a certain position in the community of responsibility or centrality or something." But there's a demand, generally speaking, and it can be that it feels quite a stretch. Something in us is being stretched, again, beyond the usual range of the self or the ego, if we use those words.

And again, to really make this clear, a demand like that, or any demand, is not inherent in the image, really. We are choosing a conceptual framework when we talk about demands this way. We're choosing a conceptual framework that nourishes, deepens, enriches, widens, supports soulfulness, soul-making, and the beauty and the meaningfulness and all of that. So that's really what we're doing. It's not inherent, this demand. We're choosing a conceptual framework that incorporates that—a conceptual framework that supports the soul-making, that nourishes the soul-making, and a conceptual framework where images and archetypes are somehow bigger than the self.

Rather than being contained within the self, as I said before, they're bigger than the self. There's something in some way eternal, or better to say timeless, about them—about these imaginal figures. Something in some way autonomous about them. Something in some way, in some particular way, real. They have a kind of reality and a kind of divinity.

So in a way these are all loaded words, loaded concepts. But we are adopting consciously a conceptual framework that entertains lightly those kinds of views. And that with all that, they have demands. That's part of the conceptual view that we're entertaining. And that the self serves them, rather than the other way around—that these imaginal figures, or archetypal figures, or daimons, are in the service of the self.

This is tricky in many ways. And again, to point out that entertaining or allowing a notion of demand from the imaginal figure, it needs this view of liquidity, this alchemical maxim of "do not proceed until everything has turned to liquid." That needs to be there—in the sense that we see that way, we see the liquidity, the emptiness, in other words, the insubstantiality of this in order to have the right relationship with this notion of demand as part of our conceptual framework. So it's not literal and the ego is not getting too stuck on this and relating to it too literally.

I keep using this word, tricky. I think there's a real subtle middle way here, as I said.

Someone was telling me, this is again some years ago, a woman was sharing in an interview about her past lovers and things and a sense of resentment at not being met by lovers equally. And I was like, in what way have you felt not met equally? And she explained a bit about that. She also shared that from quite an early age in her life, she was aware that she was very attractive to many men. And also that she had a sort of intuitive wisdom, a deep sensitivity in the areas of the erotic and the romantic. She was in her element in that and deeply attractive to many men.

And so it's almost like, as we were talking, it's almost like she was sort of an embodiment of Aphrodite, the

goddess of love and the erotic. And almost that she was, as this figure within her, this goddess, if you like, that was coming through—let's call her Aphrodite—it wanted her beauty and her sensitivity and intuitive wisdom in regards to love and eros and sensuality to be seen, to be recognized, and even a little bit to be worshipped.

Now, how close that is to a kind of ego wanting those things—ego wanting to be seen and to be regarded as beautiful and to be even worshipped—and we think, what an ego trip. Maybe some of that gets mixed into this kind of thing at times, but maybe something else is coming through at times that is in the nature of the divinity that was coming through or the imaginal figure that was coming through. And I'll return to this later.

The part of that is it's not an ego thing when that's wanting to be recognized. It's like if you say God wants to be recognized, the soul wants to be seen, something of holiness here wants to be seen. And that's different than a purely ego wanting or craving. This is very, very tricky. And sometimes you get these things mixed—perhaps more often than we might think. We tend to dismiss something as ego. No—have a closer look, sense more deeply, more soulfully into what's going on.

So all this brings up the question: what is healing? When we talk about healing in all these different ways, what do we mean? What does that word mean? Or who is healed? What is healed? What is freed? Who is being freed and healed? The ego or something else? I'm going to return to this actually. Just put that question out now. What do we mean by healing? Who is being healed? What is being healed? What is being freed?

Sometimes with the demand that we feel from an image, that we sense from the image, it's actually often quite subtle.

It might be—and I've mentioned this before—that the demand is simply to behold the imaginal figure, to witness it. There's nothing else required other than to stay with it, to look at it, to sense it, to feel into it. And in doing just that, in that simple act of beholding, the soulfulness is nurtured and enriched and deepened and expanded. The psyche expands because the soulfulness expands, and the range of image expands. With that, the love of this image—the eros—is expanded. And the conceptual framework is also expanded, as we discussed earlier.

So with all that libido—and I mean this in the sense of the whole psychic energy available in the system, not merely sexual energy—the libido also grows. Just from beholding and witnessing an image, seeing its beauty and feeling our love for it, sensing its holiness and meaningfulness and soulfulness, something is fertilizing the psyche, the eros and the logos. All of that gets expanded.

This is usually a very gradual movement. The sense of sacredness and meaningfulness gradually expands, deepens, and enriches. I'll return to this soon in another talk, but partly through engaging in imaginal practice meditatively, something starts gradually expanding. The sense of sacredness begins spilling over

into life. Life becomes multi-leveled. We start feeling and sensing life, perceiving it as richer, more sacred and meaningful everywhere—multidimensional. It's a gradual movement.

So the demand that seems to accompany an image can often be very subtle, yet it's powerful in its gradual effect. Just beholding, just witnessing.

Sometimes the love and demand from an image is not obvious—it's much more implicit, if you like. I remember some time ago, a year and a half perhaps, I had mostly finished writing my book on emptiness. After the huge amount of work that involved, I had sent the manuscript to the publisher and received the proofs back. They were so full of mistakes they had made, formatting errors, and so forth.

In meditation, I was curious to explore the whole relationship with writing the book from the perspective of imaginal practice rather than just emptiness practice, which I already knew quite well. In meditation, I encountered this figure who had come relatively often during the course of writing the book—a master sculptor in a sort of underground cave, a master sculptor and his apprentice. I tended in the image to be more in the position of the apprentice to this master sculptor.

The master communicates in some way—it wasn't quite a verbal dialogue, but he communicates: "One has to finish it. Nearly there." He's talking about the sculpture, but this is a very clear example of how it's mirroring something in my life, the writing of the book. "One has to finish it. Nearly there."

This master sculptor is basically a perfectionist, and he has to be. That is his moral code, the ethos of masters and apprentices like these. He pushes the apprentice to the limit. He's quite stern and not a pushover. He sets tasks and limits and is very firm about it. That's the moral code—the moral code of perfectionism as well. There's a lot of power in that, in a good way. There's a lot of energy in that.

He's communicating, if you like: "You do it right. You do it as perfectly as possible and to the highest standard possible. That's just what we do. That's how we do things."

There's a big rock that's either to be carved or he's half-carving it into a sculpture—he's sort of partway through it. It's a big rock, and he touches it and brushes the carving dust from it with his fingers. Sometimes it feels like that rock is my body. Somehow, through this relationship, he is carving me and carving my body.

In this case, as I mentioned, this was one of those images where there seemed to be a very clear parallel between what was happening in life and the image itself. I found myself asking, in a non-verbal way, about time and rushing—having so much other work and commitments, wanting to move on to other explorations. His response was clear: "It doesn't matter as long as it's done well. It doesn't matter how long it takes. It doesn't matter how you feel about it."

So there was a clear demand present. The love that was there remained much more implicit—not obvious. Even as I relate this, I'm aware that it doesn't sound like there's much love there, but there truly was a

profound love present. It's just not the obvious kind of love, and it wasn't being stated explicitly. This master loves his apprentice and cares for him, truly sculpting and shaping him through love. It's simply a particular quality or character of love—one that has its own unique mode of expression, implicit within the image rather than obvious.

Another imaginal figure who visits me relatively often is John Coltrane—clearly a historical figure and someone I love deeply. He comes to me sometimes when I'm meditating, curiously always sitting in the same place in my room, just in front and a little to the left, facing me on a ledge. Sometimes, in terms of work or creative output or various endeavors, he offers gentle but firm encouragement. There's something about his very physical presence—this heavy-set, strong African-American figure—and something about his resolution and commitment to his path, the force that came through him, everything that cost him, and his steadiness with that over the years. He had a short life, actually, dying at forty.

There's something in him that communicates with kindness, encouraging me gently yet firmly. Here the love was obvious, while the demand remained more implicit—coming through this gentler, encouraging mode, yet actually uncompromising. You don't simply give in or stop just because something is difficult or challenging, or because people don't understand. He faced similar struggles as his music became more avant-garde and people couldn't understand it.

Sometimes the love is not so obvious—it remains implicit—while the demand appears obvious. Sometimes the demand is more implicit, less obvious, while the love seems more apparent. And sometimes the demand that an image conveys to us feels strong and clear, but isn't necessarily practically obvious in terms of what it means, what it implies, or what it's actually asking of us.

Remember the image I shared some days ago of the person listening to the public lecture, feeling that what was being said was quite stupid and offensive, yet sensing that most others in the room thought it brilliant? Then suddenly this magnificent phoenix appeared, filling the room with its nobility. She shared more specifically about the demand, which I'd like to share with you. These are essentially her words:

"The bird showing up that way could easily sound like a revenge fantasy of sorts, and there certainly was raging going on. But when I feel into it, it's as if the phoenix isn't really concerned about engaging in dialogue with stupidity at all." In other words, it doesn't want revenge or to make anyone look foolish publicly. "It's not even carefree. It's just that by its very presence, it's seeing through and manifesting a different stance than what was being broadcast publicly by the speaker. It's manifesting a different stance and changing everything just by being there."

Then comes this profound part about the demand: "It feels like it's asking me to behold it, to bear witness to the beauty—or not only bear witness. It feels like it wants the beauty to be burnt into and carried by my heart." Somehow it's asking her to witness it, and in that witnessing, it wants the beauty to be seared into and carried by her heart.

"There's a very profound sense of being asked to serve, and I'm not sure what that means," she continued. Again, sometimes the demand feels strong but isn't entirely clear. "And to exercise discernment. The demand is to exercise discernment. And it's asking me to be bold."

All these demands—implicit yet strongly communicated, very touching and integral to the beauty itself—remain somewhat unclear in terms of where they apply, what they mean, or how their broader rippling effects might manifest in life.

It's not practically clear. And then...

As I said, sometimes the demand is just to behold, just to honor and see, if you like, the divinity of something or the beauty of something—to honor that which we're witnessing. Somehow in my life I'm honoring this imaginal figure and everything that they communicate and bear and are and express.

Sometimes it might be that we are called to act in life, in our life, or choose or tread a certain path. Sometimes it actually does have physical bearing or bears fruit in some physical manifestation, physical form or other, or physical expression. Sometimes it's just honoring something in the soul, so to speak. That's the demand. And sometimes we're actually needing to manifest and express something.

It's, again, tricky. It's sometimes difficult to discern or feel into what's being demanded here. And if it's an acting and a choosing in life, then what is the exact expression? As we said, we really need to be careful with the kind of literal, concretized mimicking of what the image is. So if it's asking for something to be acted on or chosen in my life—I need to make a certain choice to manifest something—what is that?

Some images seem to want that and some images don't seem to need that. It's on another level of just the honoring. But if it's the acting, if it needs a physical manifestation somehow, then what? And what about the ethics involved?

Again, this is—I keep using this word tricky. This is complex, rich territory to explore, not an easy, simple discernment and exploration. Sometimes we might be tempted to say: Let's put the ethics primary. Let's put the ethics very clear as a sort of boundary and framework and basis, and let's make those primary, not the images primary. And then we feel that's safer.

There is, and there may be, a real wisdom in adopting that kind of stance or that kind of position. But even that, I think, we can sometimes be a little naive or at least unaware how much our ethical responses or thoughts—our absence or lack of ethical responses in life—is shaped by fantasy and mythos.

I remember some years ago giving a talk about this, the necessity of fantasy, actually trying to point out that, if you like, it's the mythos, the fantasy that shapes the ethos, the ethics. So it's really changed now, but some years ago one could have looked at the Dharma scene—or it's changing, let's say—one could have looked at the Dharma scene and seen: Why is there so little response to the global environmental catastrophes and the problem of climate change? Why is there so little Dharma response to that? Or so

little even acknowledgment that that needs to get included in what we mean by Dharma practice and ethics? Why is it that so few Dharma people are speaking up and taking a stand and being bold with that?

That's a very complex question. There's lots involved there. And as I said, it's definitely changing in the years since then. But one of the reasons maybe is because of the domination of fantasies, if you like, that are more in line with the figures of equanimity and non-action, not getting involved, not getting... The revolutionary is not such a myth or fantasy or imaginal figure in the range of myths that are present in the Dharma, that fertilize the Dharma. And because of that, it limits the range of responses or the range of even what's included.

So this is interesting, you know, the whole relationship between, let's say, mythos and ethos, imaginal figures and fantasies and ethics. You know, what happens with terrorists? You could say, well, they really have all this imaginal stuff going and a sense of demand and duty and all that. The problem there is they're not understanding it as image. They're not seeing image as image. So jihad, holy war, is a completely literalized concept, not actually seeing it as a poetic image but something that one actually acts on in a totally literal way. That's a fundamentalist belief going on there in regard to images—completely unaware of the soul element of this, if you like, and seeing image as image.

So what happens if we trust this view, this seeing image as image? And so we use the energy body as a navigator, as I've explained. So there's a lot here—we're touching on what we touched on before, about trust and navigating all this and learning to trust. And as I said, so often scary images turn out to be real treasures.

That black devil man was around for decades. It's still around. He has become much less scary because the practitioner—she's no longer scared of him. She's kind of learned to trust him. But he hasn't, through that, become some kind of simple, desexualized nice guy. He's still the black devil man, but he's an ally—something deeply important and trustable there. Or the black hag figure that I shared the other day from someone else.

She retains that black hag character, but she's no longer scary. So they're not what they seem at first, these images. And again, the way of looking affects how they unfold and how they shape themselves. Always, always that dependent arising, dependent on the mind and the way of looking.

So seeing image as image, knowing image as image, and, if you like, entertaining this assumption of their benevolence—very crucial, these aspects of the way of looking. They really are very helpful in allowing the image to grow and fulfill its potential, you could say. Seeing the image as image and the assumptions of benevolence are part of the fabrication, the shaping of the image there, just like we pointed out in the nightmare.

And then there's also this sense of trusting the archetypal necessity in the image, this treasure image. Perhaps entrusting an archetypal necessity eventually. At the center of pathological behavior, at the core

of it, might be something archetypal. Perhaps addiction or some kind of other inclination. Sometimes in something like that, it's actually—we could say in the terms of classical mythology—it's Dionysus sometimes, the wild god of wine and ecstasy.

And Dionysus has certain demands. What are the demands? And do they need acting on? And what happens when I see image as image? And what happens when I feel it more in the body? And what needs acting on? And what can just be honored?

But sometimes in that sort of thing, it's too simple to say that's always it. I'm not saying that's always at the core of, say, alcoholic addiction. I don't mean to imply that at all. But sometimes there's something like that—some other god, if you like, or archetypal necessity at the center of something that looks just a mess of pathology. Something else is going on there. There are other demands that are not being seen in the right way and honored.

What happens if that's the case and if a person feels into that and feels into it with everything that we've been talking about with imaginal practice—all the richness and the nuance and the sensitivity of practicing with that and the conceptual framework, seeing image as image and using the energy body and trusting it and recognizing an archetypal necessity? Just that view, what might that do in relation to the pathological behavior or the addiction or whatever?

Some of you will know that one of the things that keeps addictions spinning, keeps the loop of addiction spinning, one ingredient there is shame. It's part of the vicious cycle. So typically an addict will engage in their addiction, whatever, and then afterwards feel shame. And that shame actually is very difficult to bear and propels another cycle of addictive behavior. It's almost like what they call acting out, because the shame is very hard to tolerate. And one gets caught in the self-fulfilling sort of prophecy about how useless one is or what a bad person one is. Addiction behavior leads to shame. Shame leads to more addiction behavior. Just looping like that.

But if sometimes a person can recognize the beauty, the unusual beauty, the unusual treasure, the unusual archetypal necessity or God at the center of that pathology and the demands of that God and honor what that is, who that is, then that dissolves a lot of the shame because what was seen as shameful has actually now become to be seen as divine—completely different. And then that causes a different, it opens a different, the possibility of a different way of relating with the whole addictive pattern and everything that's included there. The shame is gone and the shame as what propels this vicious cycle might be dissolved a little bit and replaced with something much more deeply, deeply respectful. And that might have a big effect in terms of the suffering there.

So these may be, for a lot of people, unusual kind of views—this trusting, this deeply trusting the treasure that an image is, even if it looks weird or pathological or dark or whatever it is, or even trusting the archetypal necessity running through what looks a mess or fucked up or whatever in our life.

Sometimes artists sense this easier or can sense this kind of what's operating in their psyche or in the psyche, can sense that easier sometimes than other people. Picasso said at one point, "Painting is stronger than I am, it does what it wants with me." There's a sense—and if you also read some of the writings, not the poems, but of T.S. Eliot or Rilke or other poets—there's really the sense of something bigger making a demand on the being. And the way that is not always necessarily so easy, but it feels important.

So again, to say again, these things, these imaginal figures, they have a certain autonomy, but autonomy—and so the autonomy to be able to make a demand—but that is not quite the same as saying they're completely independent, right?

So that black devil man we were just talking about—we've seen instances, I've shared, where an image surprises one. I could never have thought of that. And so there's an indication of the image's autonomy there. But for example, that black devil man came again in an image and had his back to this meditator. And then he turned around towards her and in her imagination she took one step towards him—this is more recently, years after the more difficult relationships with him—and took a step, took one step towards him. And him, she did in her imagination, but he kept her away with the palm of his hand and an outstretched arm on her sternum, very firm: keep your distance.

And this was very perplexing to her. It was something that he suddenly did. And she realized, he's really not in my control. He's not wholly in my control. There's an autonomy here.

But autonomy doesn't, as I said, necessarily mean independence—independence from the mind or the way of looking. Nothing is independent of the mind and the way of looking. That gesture of his was also contingent on her gesture of stepping towards him. So there's autonomy, but that's not the same as being independent and having an independent existence, independent of the view that's entertained or of the actions of the self in relation to the image.

But this sense we have of imaginal figures and the conceptual framework there—very potentially powerful, very radical.

So a retreatant said to me a little while ago, "We are doors," she said. "We are doors for what wants to come through." Again, it's a way of looking, a conceptual framework that's being entertained in saying that. I'm realizing that. And in that conceptual framework, the human self is somehow less than or within the imaginal figure. The imaginal figure is somehow more. We are just the door for what wants to come through.

Even more radically put, Henri Corbin used to say, "It's not your individuation that is your task, it's the angel's individuation that is your task." Not your individuation, but the angel's individuation is your task. Individuation was a word he borrowed from Jung, meaning growing into the fullness of your particular unique personality and that self-growth implied there. So not your growth, your path, your individuation, but the angel's. That's your task.

So again, there's a shift in view here. We're entertaining a view of the psyche, a view of psychology, a view of the self, a view of the soul, a view of images, and also of divinity and what is of value. All that is wrapped up in that sentence: Not your individuation, but the angel's individuation is your task. There's this kind of reversal of the usual way of seeing existence and what the self is and what these imaginal figures are.

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