Opening, Tuning, and Relating to the Imaginal: Instructions (3)

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 1:09:45

I just want to clarify a couple of things about the instructions and then move on.

First, regarding walking meditation. It's important to understand that walking is a posture, just like sitting is a posture, or standing or lying down is a posture. It's not in itself a meditation. We can do most meditations in the walking posture, practice most meditations in the walking posture. So it's just a posture which can be used to take the meditation in any direction we want.

In the context of imaginal practice and this course, we could divide the walking into two possibilities. On the one hand, we can do walking meditation with the intention of samadhi—cultivating that well-being, that harmonization, ease in the energy body and sensitivity to the energy body. On the other hand, we can also walk doing the imaginal practice, so the imaginal practice taking place in the walking posture.

With the samadhi in the walking posture—some of you will be familiar with this already, some of you really won't—you can start by standing. Same as when we're sitting, expand the awareness, feel the whole energy body, tune into that. If there is some well-being or pleasantness or nice energy somewhere, just stay with that. Tune to it, open to it, feel it. In all the ways that we've discussed, you're welcome to use images if they help open that, or a bit of breath work, or whatever it is, or just tuning to the energy body—everything that we talked about.

When that feels a little bit established, that nice energy or well-being or pleasantness, just linger with it and then begin to walk. But instead of paying attention to the soles of your feet or the sensations of moving the legs throughout the legs, or walking in a much wider space that includes the sky—instead of those options, we're actually walking in the sort of bubble or space of the energy body, tuned to the feeling, the texture, the vibration, the tone of that whole space, just as if you were sitting, but now one is walking. Tune to that, particularly if there's a sense of some degree of well-being or comfort or ease or even pleasure there. That's what we're paying attention to.

Same thing walking between two points, stopping at any time you want in the middle of the path, stopping for as long as you want at the end, just having that as a priority—that nourishing of the well-being in the energy body and the sensitivity to the energy body. You might need to walk a little faster to help you tune in that way, or a little slower, or a lot slower. You might need to stop a lot. It doesn't matter. You're really just taking the same practice, the same samadhi direction of practice, and applying it in a different posture. As always, being responsive, being playful, being creative, and seeing what helps.

So that would be the samadhi practice when we're walking, with the energy body when we're walking. And then it's quite possible to do imaginal practice when you're walking.

In classical metta practice, when I would give walking instructions, you can imagine the person that you're giving metta to at the end of your walking path, so that you're walking towards them, radiating metta towards them in a very lovely way. Then you reach them at the end, and they magically appear at the other end, and then you turn around and do the same thing—walk towards this person that you're radiating well-wishing towards. Or you can imagine them walking by your side, and both of you are perhaps in a bubble of well-wishing, of metta, of light, whatever, healing. Many possibilities there.

Those kinds of possibilities are possible doing walking meditation with more open imaginal practice. But actually, you will find as you play with this, there are all kinds of possibilities and ways that the surroundings can be taken in, which we'll come back to. Many, many possibilities—more than one might think before one actually gets into the walking posture with imaginal practice and plays with it a little bit.

Just as with the walking samadhi practice, you can stop at any time, you can stop for as long as you want, stand if that's helpful at any point, and vary the pace or find the pace for any session that feels most conducive to working with that image. So again, very playful, very responsive practice.

So that was the first thing I wanted to clarify.

The second thing: I feel like I probably expressed something in an unhelpful way about how long we spend with images. I said two minutes is loads. What I really meant to say, what I should have said, was two minutes may be enough. It's very possible to spend a whole session with an image, or a really long time—an hour or something like that with one image—and it's maybe evolving slowly or going through different phases or something.

The key point really is not this amount of time or that amount of time. It's just: Is it still helpful? So if I'm spending a long time with an image, does it still feel full of resonances for the soul? Is there still the soulfulness there through that? And of course, the mind wanders, you bring it back, the soulfulness might dim and then come back a little bit. But it's not so much a time guideline—as always, it's tuning into what's happening, sensitive to what's happening, just sensitive to whether the soulfulness is there and whether it feels helpful. You can spend as long or as short as feels helpful and soulful.

We began to get into a little more detail in the instructions the other day—different aspects and dimensions of the ways we can interact with images, the ways we relate to images and imaginal figures. We brought up the possibility of a shift in attitude: asking, usually implicitly, not necessarily a literal question, but asking, "What do you want?" of the imaginal figure. Not "What can you give me?" but "What do you want?" So turning things around in the relationship. Not necessarily an actual question—well, it could be—but more a sense, sensing and intuiting. It's really a shift in attitude with the imaginal figure.

So I just want to restate that again and say a little bit more about that as we go on through the retreat.

What do you want?

And perhaps what this imaginal figure, what this daemon wants is to be expressed in some way, probably in my life. So maybe that's what it wants, but again, not so literally. Its expression may not just be a concrete, literalized mimicry of what the image is.

And it may be that what the imaginal field wants is just to be seen. It actually is not asking for any expression or doing something different. It just wants to be seen, to be acknowledged and to be honored. And the key word there is the honoring. There's a sense this is something that needs honoring. And we get the sense that's what it wants.

And maybe what it wants is really to look at you in a certain way. What's really important with some imaginal figures or instances with imaginal figures is how they see you, how this image sees me, how it looks at me, this imaginal figure or animal or whatever it is. How they respond and act towards me—that's actually what's important.

Because one of the possibilities within that of how they see me and how they act towards me, there are many, many ways in which healing can happen at many different levels. I could give so many examples of this, the healing possibilities, the different healing possibilities of working with images.

I think I already talked about the retreatant who was meditating and had the liver condition and was in some pain and low energy with her liver condition. Then this magnificent lion came towards her that she was already familiar with from before and started licking her liver. The healing that came out of that and how that moved then into the samādhi as the energy body changed over twenty minutes or so.

And then recently someone was sharing how they were beginning in their life to dare to look more closely at a really quite painful aspect of their relationship with their father when they were much younger, and how there was really some sexual inappropriateness there from the father. All the pain that that brought up and the confusion and the difficulty there—opening to that, daring to open to that, and the courage that that took. Another image that she'd had before quite regularly, this phoenix that I mentioned before and will mention again in another context as well—this phoenix came. This huge, beautiful, immensely strong but very compassionate phoenix bird came and enfolded her completely in its huge wings.

It was actually behind her and brought its wings to cover her whole body, particularly her breasts, and so much healing in that. And interesting to me that even in the gesture—we talked about this—in the gesture of doing something very healing, very protective in the unfolding of the wings of this phoenix, the image itself and that gesture had a kind of eroticism to it, the way it covered her breasts. And so in a way, there was a healing of the erotics there as well. It was erotic, but it had so much love and healing with it that it actually healed something, or began to heal something around the sexuality.

There are so many possibilities. I remember certainly more than a year ago a beautiful image that really touched me. I'll say a little bit about it just because there are a few other aspects that are instructive.

I was feeling not well physically, a stomach ache. Suddenly, in the meditation, this huge Godzilla-like creature appeared, seeming to be made of metal parts, with red blazing eyes and raging. But then very suddenly that also collapsed or shattered or exploded and morphed into this giant anthropomorphic figure, so this giant human-like figure, but it seemed also to be made of metal. Then very quickly that collapsed, shattered, and shrunk into a fox which at first seemed like it was made of metal but then shrugged off the metal exterior to become more fleshy and furry and natural—a fox animal.

This fox is a fugitive. He travels alone and he avoids contact. He hides. I feel myself into his body at times. I feel what it feels like to be him. And I get a sense of him both from within and also looking at him. And I sense his wisdom. There's something about this fox—he's very wise and he knows things. He knows esoteric things and philosophical things. But he's very tentative about who he comes close to, who he lets himself come close to.

There's something—he will only let himself come close if he senses that you really want to learn. And there's something about this fox that's so beautiful. I bow to him imaginatively in the meditation. My heart feels drawn to bow and to make añjali with my hands in that gesture of bowing. There's a real sense of reverence and softness, and I feel tearful in the meditation as I'm doing this.

And I get a sense of him and I see him on his travels, and he will come, this fox, to a circle of people around a fire, for instance, and give of his wisdom. He's open to doing that, but otherwise he avoids, he hides, he is furtive and fugitive. And it might even be that someone is trying to catch him or destroy him.

So I'm getting the sense of this fox and the beauty of it and the reverence in the relationship there. And then he stands on my stomach, and I'm still in the sitting posture in the meditation, my physical body, but imaginarily I lie down. His paws bear the touch of his wanderings, and the paws press in onto my belly at certain points, as if they're almost acupressure points in my stomach and in my back for healing. And it feels very, very healing. There's something—again, I feel the energy harmonize and heal. It feels very lovely there.

So there are lots of dimensions to that kind of image. In this example, like a lot of healing can go on there in images.

Many different dimensions unfold within imaginal practice. And also, as we mentioned already, love emerges as a central element. In the relationship with the imaginal figure, particularly how they look at me or how I look at them, love may be the most important thing.

I think I told the image of the white horse and the beautiful love between us, really. And then that image of the jazz musician Eric Dolphy as I was doing the walking meditation. The whole thing there really seemed about my gratitude and my love. A little bit about his blessing me, but really it was about my love and my gratitude. And how so much that love is part of the soul-making.

And again, to quote that beautiful poem of Mary Oliver's from her collection West Wind, it's a prose poem

actually about Percy Bysshe Shelley, the poet who drowned very young. She says, she's writing about him, "I love this poet, which means nothing here or there, but it's like a garden in my heart."

So the love that we have for these imaginal figures, or that they have for us, it means nothing to anyone, perhaps. My love of Eric Dolphy, you might say, who cares? But something, it does something. It's a garden in my heart. In other words, it's fertile in my heart and in my soul. It is soul-making, the love there. That figure and the love in relationship to it is soul-making.

And as we said, when I talked about another musician, Keith Jarrett, that love itself, the eros there, wants to penetrate further and open up the image of the beloved so that it does open the image and give other dimensions and range to the image and more of a sense of sacredness. And that opening of the range and opening of the sense of sacredness opens and fertilizes not just the image, but also fertilizes—then it asks for an expansion of the conceptual framework to include those other dimensions. And then the eros may love more, and so on. So there's a real fertilizing process going on through the love and through the eros.

And again, I've said this before, it's so important. When the love is there in the image, either way or both ways—from me towards the image, from the image towards me—we're really interested in the particular quality of that love. So love has such a range of possibilities for us as human beings. There's so many flavors and styles and dimensions and qualities to the different kinds of love that are possible for us.

So it's not always just simple universal metta or just compassion. It may be. But they may be, as for instance in this image of Eric Dolphy and the love there, very, very particular quality. So really to tune in and notice the particular quality of love that's present with any imaginal interaction.

All this about the healing and the love is part of this question: how am I drawn or asked to interact with this image? Sometimes we feel almost pulled or led in or invited into a certain mode of interacting. It may be a verbal dialogue, it may be something else entirely, maybe more sexual interaction—there is a lovemaking, you know. There's all kinds of possibilities, all kinds.

But this whole—when we say, as I said in the earlier instructions, to include an awareness of the thoughts that come up in relation to this image and the conceptual frameworks that are operating. And then we add this dimension of a kind of attitude or stance in relationship to the image of what do you want. So all of these things, these aspects of the relationship with the image, they bring up the question or they imply the question of the relationship, the exact relationship: what is the relationship between this image and my life?

And this is an interesting question, to say the least. It's potentially quite tricky, but it's interesting. It's not something we want to think too much about or kind of interpret—you know, think and form an interpretation. It's more something we'll kind of get glimpses of or feeling for, intuitive awareness of that a relationship is there and what is the relationship or how are things mirroring.

So sometimes an image will give advice, sometimes, to a person about their life. So I actually remember

quite some years ago now, an image—actually, the image is not that important. There were black and white figures and a sort of ritual thing going on with these figures. And this is years ago before I had done that much imaginal practice. And I remember at some point being drawn to ask these sort of priest-like figures if I should go ahead and write this book about emptiness that people had been asking me to write, a few people. And the answer was clearly yes, that even if it didn't have much—wasn't popular or didn't sell very well—it would still be a worthwhile thing.

But that kind of thing, I think, is quite rare, where an image actually gives advice. And not only is it rare, I think, again, my leaning, or my favorite leaning, as is obvious by now on this retreat, is that it would be more interesting, rather than getting advice, the soul-making and the soulfulness is the emphasis. And that makes it more interesting, the whole relationship with the image, the whole imaginal practice, rather than me just seeking out these images to get advice about what I should do.

This can become too much, possibly can become too much of an ego thing, trying to be successful at this and that, whatever. More interesting, more radical, will be just to prioritize the soul-making, and the soul-making also with respect to the relationship of the image and my life. And what helps that to be soul-making, to have this soul-making stance or support the soul-making there?

It's this sense of life and images mirroring each other, but particularly my life mirroring these images and these imaginal figures, or echoing these imaginal figures. My life, myself, my journey, the soul events of my life, having their origins and their roots in some way in these imaginal figures, in these archetypal dimensions, these more divine dimensions of being, if you like. And that kind of loose conceptual framework, that kind of attitude, is much more supportive and opening for the soul-making and the soulfulness.

Clearly, anyone playing with imaginal practice even a little bit will notice that images reflect life at times, or something happens in one's life, or some thread in one's life, and it's expressed in the images. That's obvious; one can see that. But more interesting to me is this other direction of flow—causality may be too strong a word—where images find their expression in life. Life, as I said, mirroring or echoing or having its origins or roots in the imaginal figures. This to me is more interesting, more radical, and more conducive and supportive of soul-making.

So yes, life leads to images, but more interesting is when images have their fruits in life or are expressed in my life. Actually, even if it seems clear that it's an event in life or a feeling in life that has given rise to this image, the image then, practiced in the right way, becomes—or at least leads to—a way of looking at life, a certain relationship. Even when it seems obvious that the image was spawned or had its roots, was born out of some event in my life and mirrors that, relating to it as image then shapes and constellates a rich and potentially soul-making way of looking and relating to that part of life, my whole life, or that event, or that aspect of myself.

So the image, in the way that we're talking about it, turns into something that is always soul-making,

whatever its origins seem to be. Very simply, the question always is: does it enhance the soulfulness? Does it nourish and deepen and widen and ignite and enrich soulfulness, the sense of soulfulness? Is there soul-making here? Not so much what the origins are. I can see it either way. But if it does seem to come out of life—the image mirrors life rather than the other way around, which would be the more unusual way of looking at it—if the image does seem to come out of life, then picking it up in the right way, practicing it in the right way, does it bring soulfulness? Does it enhance the soulfulness? Does it nourish that soulfulness?

Sometimes the soulfulness with respect to an image is very much helped by the awareness of a kind of loose connection with life or mirroring of my life—that my life mirrors the image or the other way around. Sometimes it's really helped by this awareness in the meditative consciousness, being aware of the connections. It makes it more soulful, more poignant sometimes. And sometimes not, actually. And we don't need to look for it.

This is a curious thing. Most images perhaps really have a connection with life. We see our life mirroring these images or vice versa. And there's a lot of soul-making in that connection or in the awareness of that connection—a lot of emotional resonances, ideational resonances, soul resonances. And sometimes not, and we don't need to look for it.

As an example of one that isn't, I remember a year and a half or so ago, suddenly in meditation there was a pond or lake in moonlight, a very tranquil, almost otherworldly scene, very beautiful. Out of the trees and the foliage right by the shore of this lake stepped a white unicorn suddenly, standing there by this very still moonlit lake in the moonlight at the shore.

There was a deep sense of silence to this unicorn, a very beautiful creature. And again, there was love from him or her—I actually couldn't tell the gender—love from the unicorn to me and also from me to this unicorn. And again, a sense of devotion. I'm not even quite sure what exactly I was devoted to. It brought a stillness into my whole being. This unicorn was solitary, a solitary creature, very unafraid. There was no danger here, very still. But the whole image really seemed to be in another world, a world somehow unconnected with the ups and downs and the vicissitudes of this world and this life—something very unperturbed and unconcerned, very touching, and yet there was nothing about this that had any relationship with the events of this life, really.

So sometimes many images do have that relationship with life, or our life mirrors an image, and sometimes not. We want to be sensitive to that in the practice.

When there is a mirroring or echoing of our life, we want to make sure we have a non-literalistic understanding of that relationship. So if there's this soldier or warrior image, I know it doesn't mean to join the army or harm anyone in any way. Or the wanderer image—I know it doesn't mean that. We've been into this.

Another example: I remember quite some time ago, an image of a painter's studio, an artist's studio. It seemed to have a lot of potency to it, this image, but I was trying to understand it a little too literalistically at first in the meditation. Then I began to be with it in a couple of different sessions, and I realized it was really about the space. There was a connection in terms of my sense of my work and the importance of creative output and being creative, which is something that feels very important to me—letting that flow and producing creatively, which is also something that feels deep in my soul, very important.

But not to take it literally—to become a painter, I'm far from that or hiring a place—but it was about the space, about the enclosing walls protecting this space and this space of creativity and all the attitudes of the artist that go with that, and all the sacred space of the artist. Not wanting to translate that too literally, it wasn't that I needed to go and find some place like that, which I don't have and I didn't do that. But it can be there as an image and fertile and fertilizing as an image in the psyche—the space, the artist's studio. So there's a relationship there, but it does not have to be literalistic or concretely acted out usually.

Now, you've noticed, I know for sure, that as one is practicing with images, all kinds of doubts can come up, just like when one is practicing any other meditation. Doubt is a hindrance, one of the five hindrances classically, and can come up, and there can be confusion or sometimes even paralysis with regards to the practice. So very often, the question is operating there, and often consciously but sometimes unconsciously: "Am I doing this right?" And the fear of doing it wrong. So that question is there and it's dominating and it's pressuring things—getting it right or getting it wrong and the fear there.

Rather than that, what I really so much want to emphasize is an attitude of experimentation and playfulness. So letting go of right and wrong and just playing and having fun and daring to experiment, and asking instead: "Does this feel helpful?" That's a very different question—"Am I doing this right or am I doing it wrong?" versus "Does this, what I'm doing right now, how I'm relating to this image, how I'm holding the attention, what I'm paying attention to—does it feel helpful?" And now we're adding: "Does it feel soulful? Is there soulfulness coming out of this?"

So these questions are much more useful questions and much more fertile questions. They open the avenues rather than locking them down.

And again, a person might have a doubt: "Am I making this up?" Especially with imaginal practice, it happens all the time—"Am I making this up?" So this is really important, and different people who work with images in psychotherapy or other modalities have different opinions on this. I would like to say that actually it's okay if an idea comes into the mind in imaginal practice, or an impulse to make something happen with an image, or to introduce some other element or some other figure into an image, or change it even perhaps at times.

Not a problem if I'm making it up. Always—and this is a rule of thumb now, let's make it into a guiding rule—always the question is: "Does this feel like it's nourishing and opening and deepening and enriching the soulfulness right now?" So the soulfulness becomes the indicator, as I said, the navigator of our

practice in the moment. Not so much "it's always wrong to make things up" or "I should always make things..." That doesn't matter. We don't need to get snagged with that question, "Oh, that's the ego doing that." Just use the fruit, the result in the moment, how it feels, and use the soulfulness as an indicator, as a navigator that we're on the right track.

So there's a responsiveness there. If it feels soulful and I've made this thing happen in the image—no problem, it feels soulful. If I haven't and it doesn't, it's tuning into that, the soulfulness aspect and the resonances there, and letting that guide us, trusting that.

So again, with the doubt, some person might say they're with an image and "this is too weird" or "this is too dark" or whatever this image, and the mind comes in with its views. And we talked about this in the opening talk—its limited range of what's okay or what kind of images are acceptable, or what's emotionally okay in the range, or in terms of the self-view. "This is too weird." So often a person will think that in imaginal practice. Or "too dark."

Or conversely, actually, a person says, "This isn't weird enough. This should be weirder. I've heard all these stories. People say this and that happens, or Rob said this," you know, whatever. Or generally speaking, meditating and the thought or the inclination: "Something else should be happening." So this is very, very common. But again, could we rather be more responsive and let other factors, other aspects of what's going on be our guides—namely the energy body and the way that responds when an image is right and soulful, as I outlined the other day in the instructions, and all the different cues and clues we can pick up on in the energy body.

And the sense of soulfulness and the resonances and the beauty and the depth and the meaningfulness and all that that we outlined. So letting the energy body and the sense of soulfulness guide us rather than the mind's often too tight or locked-in views.

And the energy body and the sense of soulfulness, what's going on there, might be quite subtle, might not be that far out or dramatic, those effects there. But we can really use them as indicators, as part of the whole sensitivity of developing the sensitivity of the instruments.

And again, in terms of doubts, for instance, "Well, I don't have images, or I don't get very many images," or whatever. But remember, we've been through this, so this is repetition at this point, but remember, an image is not necessarily visual, and there's a whole range of possibilities there in terms of the sense modalities operating.

This "I don't have images," which I've heard a few times from people over the years—again, to repeat: the views that we have, meaning the conceptual frameworks that we entertain or that we're holding, will allow or support more or less images depending on what the conceptual framework is. So some conceptual frameworks just won't allow and support a fertile enough soil in the psyche for images to arise, because wrapped up in the view and the conceptual framework is a dismissal or denigration,

ontologically or otherwise, of images.

And so that's very connected just with attitudes in general. Images are daydreams, they're papañca, they're worthless. It's not being mindful. When there's an image or a fantasy, that's not being in touch with reality—all these kinds of attitudes and views are really, really prevalent, as we said in the opening talk. And they will have an effect on what then arises in the psyche. They will constrain the possibility of images arising.

And of course, especially if you come through the insight meditation tradition, as I do, one has practiced—I had practiced for years diligently discarding images when they came up for the most part and returning to the breath or returning to so-called bare attention or whatever, with all the attitudes implied in that being reinforced. And as a practice, just reinforcing this discarding and returning to something that seemed or was deemed to be more, quote, "real."

And so the attitudes, the views, and the practice over years will, as I said, constrain and decrease the flow of images and the arising and availability of images. So just to be aware of that, if it still feels like, "Well, I really don't have images in that sense," we have trained ourselves out of that through practice and view. But we can open that door again. We can train the imagination, if you like, and train the sensitivity and the opening and the tuning to the imaginal through practice and through opening up the view, as we've talked about.

But in terms of how much people actually have arising for them images in the sense of imaginal objects or figures, whatever sense modality that's coming in—that's not the deepest objective, as I would see it, of the retreat. The thing that I'm most interested in is opening up and sensitizing to a whole different way of sensing life, opening up the perception of this here and now, of life, of self, of other, of world. That to me is the objective that I'm most deeply interested in for all this. And so whether or not I have lots of actual imaginal objects, imaginal figures arising is secondary. It may be that that's part of my trajectory. It may be that's not so much part of my trajectory. But there's another objective that's more important, I would say.

And again, just saying more about the whole question about doubt and navigating all this: So often with imaginal practice, an image that is initially scary arises and becomes, over time—sometimes very quickly, and sometimes really over quite a while, months or even years, in some cases years, but usually because before they've been introduced to all the things that we're talking about—becomes a helpful image. What started scary or was initially felt to be a scary image becomes helpful.

A person was telling me some time ago about what she called "the black hag"—this old woman dressed in black, sort of witch-like, and seemed very dark, the black clothes, and the ugly old woman features, and kind of had this aura of what seemed to be wickedness. But actually, no. This image, with spending more time trusting a little bit, became a really, really helpful figure, deeply fertile in the psyche and the soul and deeply wise as well. The style of love and admonition, if you like, from the black hag was not cute and

cuddly and soft. She retained her kind of character, but there was absolute love in it and lots of trust. So it's again a certain particular quality or flavor of the love that flowed through there. But nothing scary in that, nothing harmful in that, just that the mind immediately picked up on it in a certain way and assumed that this was scary.

So often what seems scary at first actually turns out to be something very helpful. And this is important. Can we trust the benevolence of these imaginal figures? Or is it possible even to play with trusting, just enter into trusting for a period, a portion of a meditation, maybe just a few minutes? Can I play with even imagining that they are benevolent, trusting that there's something there? Because that trust becomes a significant factor in the whole mix of imaginal practice. The trust itself will affect the way of looking. In the moment that there's trust, we're looking and relating differently. In the moment when there isn't trust, we're looking and relating differently than that. And the way of looking always affects the images, just like any other perception—the way of looking always affects, always makes a difference.

So you can see this in nightmares, for instance. I don't know if ever in a nightmare, perhaps you're chased by a monster in a nightmare, and something changes in the way that you see the monster, and there's a little bit more of a kinder view of the monster. And guess what? The monster changes in the nightmare. The more fear I have of the monster, the less trust, the more I run away from it, the more oppressive and scary looking it becomes, the more it feels dangerous. And when that fear subsides for whatever reason, if you've ever experienced this in a nightmare, the whole monster as an apparition changes as well. So the image is affected by the way of looking, and we can sometimes play with the trust, trusting there's a treasure there, trusting there's something beautiful and right and necessary there. So we can—again, this is part of the eidos, the idea that we entertain—trusting it, trusting that there's a treasure there, even if it looks at first a little bit scary. This is an important point.

And eventually, through practice with images and the kind of conceptual frameworks that we're talking about, eventually this might actually mature, this attitude and this vision of images. It might even mature to a place where we trust the archetypal necessity even at the center of reality, so-called pathological behavior or behavior that is quite painful in our lives—maybe even addiction or addictive inclinations or pathological inclinations. It can even mature to a place where we trust that even somewhere in the middle of that, there's an archetypal necessity. So this is tricky, and it's a fine line here, so I need to see in that case image as image.

What happens often—it might be that what's happening there is that image that's operating archetypally in this addiction or whatever it is, is seen not as image, is taken too concretely. So if I do identify or get in touch with an archetypal necessity at the center of this pathological behavior or whatever it is, I really need to see image as image. But one gets a sense that in some of the kind of real knots of our life or places where there is addiction or this or that and there's suffering and pathological behavior, it's not—something else can be at the center there, at the root there.

Sometimes people, we can be a little oversimplistic in our psychology and say, "Always it's because what one is seeking is love, and one is going about it the wrong way. Everyone wants love and people look for it in mistaken places. And that's what's driving addiction and that's what drives this dukkha-making behavior or whatever it is or this inclination." Or we tend to, again, be too simple psychologically and say it's always down to the seeking of pleasure and the seeking to run away from unpleasant feelings. And that's what's driving the addiction. It's an escape mechanism.

I mean, that may be going on, but it may not be the whole of what's driving this thing or at the center of it. So I feel sometimes we want to have very simple psychologies and apply them universally. Everyone wants love, and that's what's driving it. They're just seeking love in this mistaken way, or seeking happiness, or seeking pleasure, or fleeing unpleasant emotions. Maybe, maybe for sure, but maybe there's more—richer and deeper archetypal necessities which need a different relationship. They need honoring, but also seeing their image. We could say much more about this, though I won't elaborate further now.

Sometimes, still on the subject of doubt and trust, we encounter an image that seems weird or insignificant. We can't really see the point of it. But over time, it may gradually come to feel more significant and affect our lives long-term—this image that at first did not seem very meaningful. Perhaps something is coming through this image, or our ability to receive what wants to come through—one's daemon—is emerging slowly, gradually, in ways not immediately obvious.

There's an open question in imaginal practice regarding what we might call pacing with images. I've touched on this before, but want to repeat it because it's quite important. I learned this from Thomas Moore, the contemporary psychologist. He talked about listening to music. When we really love a piece of music, we listen to it again and again. No one says, "Oh, I've heard that piece once—I wouldn't listen to it again." If you love it, you want to hear it repeatedly.

This contrasts with, say, a book or dharma talk that explains things in rational terms and takes you there. Once I've understood it, I don't need to hear it again. An image is more like beloved music than information or instruction.

Sometimes with dharma talks I've given, people tell me they've listened over and over. Most often this happens because they're packed with information and explanation that requires multiple listenings to absorb. But occasionally someone says, "There's that little story or image you related"—they're talking about perhaps a ten-second fragment—"and I just loop it round and round. I don't know what it is about that, but I keep listening to that tiny section."

What they're doing is that stretch has become alive for them as an image. Just as someone who truly loves music will listen to the same passage again—sometimes the same piece repeatedly—there's something that's become soulfully fertile, not just informationally fertile.

Similarly with images: Do I want to move on to the next image, or recall one deliberately and marinate

with it again? Tune to it again, linger with it, just as we would with music—be in that soul space, that soul world of the image, tuning and marinating in its energies, emotions, soulfulness, and resonances.

So it's an open question: when to bring back an image and be with it more—maybe it evolves, maybe not, it doesn't need to—and when to move on and be more open. I don't think there's right or wrong here. I'm simply flagging this as an element of our pacing.

Sometimes we deliberately bring a helpful image to mind, but it doesn't stay as that image. It fertilizes and spawns other images that seem unconnected. Someone told me they were struggling with a complex life situation—sitting in meditation, feeling weighed down by this intricate knot they couldn't see a way forward with, feeling beaten down by it all.

They deliberately brought to mind their niece and nephew, whom they absolutely delighted in and loved deeply. That image didn't stay. Love arose—they felt the love and delight for the children. Then suddenly the image changed, becoming a woman dancing—powerful in her body, poised and confident, dancing with great energy and passion and bravura and skill.

Tuning to this image of the dancer, which seemed to have nothing directly related to their situation or to the niece and nephew, the whole situation they were facing began to feel different. Through the image of this dancer, they gained not only space but a different perspective on what was unfolding.

The poet W.B. Yeats wrote about "the images that yet fresh images beget." Sometimes there's an image that gives birth to, or catalyzes, another image that can be deeply helpful.

Someone a while ago talked to me about imaginal practice, really picking up on this idea that we can relate to images as part of a self-help tool, journey, practice or path—which is fine, completely fine. But they asked, "How can I steer it beyond that sort of self-help attitude and relationship?" I want to say a bit about that here, because what we're really talking about this morning is more about interacting with images, relating to them and navigating with images.

How do we go beyond the self-help relationship? Well, it's really playing with this idea of perhaps serving—playing with the idea of serving this angel or this daemon or this imaginal figure. In the meditation, playing with that as an idea that I'm serving it rather than it serving me. And that's very improvised. One wants to tune in to what that feels like. It may involve even a devotional sense. There's no right or wrong way of doing that. We really can improvise with that.

Related to that are all the conceptual ideas we've talked about that support or nourish that soulfulness and soul-making. So it's all of that included. But really, it's taking the time as well with those images that feel deep, that feel important, that we have the sense with them that my life is mirroring them somehow. Those are the images that will really, along with the right attitude towards them—playing with their attitude and this idea of serving—will really turn around into this other more radical relationship.

So serving the angel, the daemon, my life mirroring it, but again, not literal. It's not necessarily so concretized or literalized. That would make me quite nervous, I think, that kind of too tight and too literalized attitude. We're talking again about poetic images, a poetic sensibility, which can be yet very, very powerful without being literal.

And at times, I've mentioned this sense that we can have of the kind of non-temporal dimension of images, the timelessness, or the eternality that images seem to have. That's part of their poetic nature, it's part of their iconic nature, and part of what gives them this power—that they somehow exist beyond time. Tuning into that can be really, really helpful in this sense of opening up a more radical relationship with them.

Again, just to touch on something I think I threw out earlier, just to restate it and amplify just a tiny bit. I talked about the octave of an image, or the register of an image, if we use words from musical metaphors. What do I mean by that? I mean the degree of solidity or substantiality that the image seems to have.

So for example, one might have an erotic image, and it looks like and maybe feels like—it feels very solid, earthy, fleshy. Maybe it's got a more raunchy kind of erotic character or feel to the whole thing. That's one end of the spectrum of this register of pictures, that's one octave. Or one might have, in terms of events that take place or characters in the image, something very similar, but the whole thing appears more etheric, more insubstantial. One could say it's happening at a higher pitch. It might be very erotic without being so obviously sexual, for instance.

There's not a right or wrong here. That's really, really important. It's not like higher is better. I mean, I think some people might say that. Some people might say lower is better in terms of this register of the images, of the solidity or substantiality of the image.

What you'll notice—definitely, again, you can't get away from this dependent arising—so that dependent on the mind state is the sense of the perception of substantiality of the image. In other words, when we're in a very, very insubstantial state, a state that's perceiving a lot of insubstantiality in the body and in everything else—when perhaps deep emptiness or deep samadhi, those kind of states, deep metta—that mind state will tend to constellate images, or the images that are constellated within that mind state, within that state of consciousness, will tend to be insubstantial. It's dependent arising, dependent on the mind state, the state of consciousness.

And it's malleable. You'll find that you can actually transpose an image to another register, another octave—the same image at another octave, or similar enough, or it changes a bit at another octave. So yes, it's dependent on the mind state, and yes, it's malleable.

And, if it's not too much contradiction, one can also sense at times that this particular image—this is the octave that it belongs in. It belongs in the more earthy, substantial, solid range, or it belongs in this more higher, etheric range. That's part of the tuning and the sensitivity—actually feeling what feels right,

without making that too heavy a word.

Certainly with an image, certainly with the image or the sense of the self and the body, that can also have this range of register, of octaves. And also—and very importantly, we're going to get more into this—of the surroundings, of the world, can be very solid and very insubstantial. So I'm just pointing that out and seeing if you can notice and learn and play and tune and become sensitive there.

Okay, last thing. All images—probably most images—are portable, so to speak. We can transport them to other situations, other postures, other interactions in the day.

A person, this is really quite a while ago, was telling me how they were beginning to really enjoy playing with bringing in, incorporating the image of Kuan Yin into their meditations, and particularly into the way they were doing metta and compassion meditations. And this sense of Kuan Yin as a living deity, a living imaginal figure, also had a complexity of character. She had different flavors. Sometimes she was very playful. Sometimes she was very tender. Sometimes she was like a kind of pixie.

There was a whole range there of different flavors to her, and therefore to the expression itself in practice, to her personality, to the kind of love that came out at different times in these different flavors.

And so he was enjoying all that and imagining her at times—this is where the portability comes in—actually imagining her in others. So looking at his friend or talking with a work colleague and actually imagining that Kuan Yin was in that person or expressing through that person, that person was Kuan Yin. And depending on the flavor of Kuan Yin that was manifesting at that time, a particular personality or expression, the quality of love, he would feel devoted to them more generally, but also in different ways, depending on the flavor. The relationship changed anyway, just by seeing them as Kuan Yin, feeling and imagining and sensing them as Kuan Yin. And then within that, there was also quite a range of how that felt.

This is very similar if you know about Mother Teresa and her practice working with the poorest of the poor and people suffering from leprosy and all kinds of other injuries and sicknesses. Her practice was basically to see everyone as Christ. So she sees the person, and at the same time she sees Christ within them. And that was her main practice, in fact, and that was what enabled her to do the amazing work that she did.

An image that comes up a lot for me in all kinds of different ways is the image of the jazz musician. I actually was a jazz musician years ago, and the image can come up many different ways. And again, it's something that's portable sometimes, but its portability is quite subtle. One might think with the mind, "Oh, jazz musician, that means improvising. So it just means improvise through the day in your work and in your interactions without having a sort of plan of what to do." But it does mean that this image can be translated in that way, but also in a lot more subtle ways, which maybe on this retreat I'll go into as an example.

The way these images can spill over can be... there's a real range there. There's a whole variety and it can be very, very subtle. So I'm not even sure I could properly articulate the way the jazz musician image then might come in when I'm talking to someone or listening to them. It's not just about improvisation. It's really quite subtle in terms of the whole sensibility of self and other and situation.

So, self-image, other image, self-fantasy, other fantasy, and they are portable. And then we also talked about fantasy of the Dharma. And are we aware of what the fantasy is? That's an optional question—strand if you like. You can investigate that if you want or ponder it or reflect on it or tune into it: what is the fantasy of the Dharma that you've been entertaining?

But basically to say again: where there is love, where there is a sense of meaningfulness, of beauty, of depth, there you will find fantasy, image, mythos operating. Where there is love, meaningfulness, beauty, depth, soulfulness—there, there is a fantasy and image operating. Question is: what is it?

So we can begin to look at this and begin to make it portable—the image, the fantasies of self, the image, the fantasies of other—play with them, and also of the world and the cosmos. And so I'm going to say more about this as we go on: the image, imaginal practice in relationship to the world.

But you might notice already that images you're working with begin to spread out and sort of suffuse or transform a little bit or transubstantiate, but they spread out to the wider world, the surroundings, the environment, and even the sense of the whole cosmos. So just to say for now, it's really okay if that happens. It's part of the portability. It's part of the work with images. I would expect it to happen. Let it happen. Play with it a little bit, sensitize a little bit, and hopefully we're going to elaborate more about that in the next few days.

Okay, that's enough for now.

Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.