Aspects of the Imaginal (Part 2)

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Just to recap briefly, we said we could notice, acknowledge, and think about a spectrum of uses of the imagination. For example, there is the unskillful, unhelpful use of the imagination in papañca, and then there are many kinds of good, useful, important ways the imagination can be used that are actually part of developing practice. We can differentiate different ways imagination can be used, and we can discern a little bit more finely and understand what we mean by imaginal—the imaginal imagination, if you like.

In doing that and pointing to some of those features, attributes, and aspects of the imaginal, this will be useful not just for the understanding and the logos and the usefulness of the conceptual framework, but also in terms of igniting practice. These discernments can function—and I'll explain how later—as keys to understanding imaginal practice.

So on that spectrum, we talked about, for example, the use of imagination with mindfulness. What's often not there when there's papañca, of course. So mindful imagination, for example, in mettā practice, compassion practice—we're deliberately and mindfully using the imagination for skillful ends. We have mindful embodied imagination and healing imagination, again with mindfulness, with body awareness. All kinds of possibilities there: light shining onto the body or in the body where there's illness or injury or all kinds of possibilities.

But these examples—the mindful imagination in mettā or compassion, embodied imagination, healing imagination—they are not necessarily imaginal. They may be very, very helpful, important, necessary parts of practice, very useful, very beneficial, but they're not necessarily imaginal. Often they are not. They may be imaginal. In other words, it's possible to be using the imagination in a compassion practice and it becomes imaginal, or it is imaginal. And the same with healing images—it's both imaginal and healing. So they may or may not be what we're calling imaginal. Actually, even a daydream—we can catch a daydream and then there's mindfulness, then we stay with it and start relating to it in certain ways and it becomes imaginal. So these may or may not be imaginal.

I rattled through very quickly a list of attributes, aspects, and characteristics of what we're calling the imaginal. That list was not intended to be exhaustive, and it certainly wasn't exhaustive, nor was it intended to be too rigid or too neatly delineating between these different elements or aspects of the imaginal. It's not too rigid, not too neat and sharp, these distinctions between these elements, and it's certainly not an exhaustive list.

For example, we talked about the imaginal—you could sum up what the imaginal is: it's more about the way of looking than about the object per se. But that way of looking includes some degree of lessening of

fabrication in the way of looking, that it's fabricating perception less, even if that's very, very slight.

Also in the way of looking—and I'm actually mentioning some elements now that I didn't mention in the list yesterday, mentioning things that we could have said were implicit in the list, but actually we could draw them out and kind of add to the list. So in this relationship that makes up a part of the imaginal, the actual relationship between subject and object, in the poise, the stance of that relationship with the imaginal includes a sense of duty—duty to what is perceived, the duty of the self to what is perceived. I've talked quite a bit about this on several retreats in the past few years. Duty is another element of this constellation of imaginal. Trust as well, and again that's something that I've highlighted several times on past retreats dealing with imaginal practice.

Duty and trust. Now, if someone's coming to this new and they just hear those words—duty and trust to something in your imagination—it sounds completely bonkers, certainly very dangerous. What, I have a duty? I'm going to follow all the voices in my head and do what they say? And I just blindly trust them? I'm not going to go into it right now, but if you're familiar with the material we've covered, you'll know that it's much more nuanced than that, much more subtle than that, and doesn't come without caveats and certain qualifications. But duty and trust are elements we could add to the list.

As is, and again related to the relationship that makes up the imaginal, that constitutes the imaginal: the intention for being with this image and for exploring this imaginal image needs to be not primarily for the sake of self in the ways that we usually understand self, not primarily for my psychological process, for my spiritual development, for my personal growth, for my empowerment. All these things may well accrue with imaginal practice, but something happens when those intentions are the primary intentions. And strictly speaking, again, if we're talking about a spectrum here, we're not really in the fully or authentically or genuinely imaginal there. So something, again, about the relationship: duty, trust, and the intention is not primarily for self. And that's also something I've talked quite a bit about in one of the last retreats—I think it was Re-Enchanting the Cosmos, I'm not sure.

So not an exhaustive list, not too rigid a list, not so neatly, sharply cut up between the elements. But most of these elements will apply to so-called—I wish I had a better word—so-called intra-psychic images, imaginal images, and the perception of this material other, material object or other person, or the world, or the self—an imaginal perception of that. This world that we move in, that we agree in, seen imaginally.

So this list applies to both, because, again, the way we have been and still want to use that word, imaginal, means more than just intra-psychic images, more than just "I close my eyes and something appears in my mind's eye," or I hear something, or whatever it is. And as I said, we'll come back to this, but a better term, a more helpful term for some people to really make that aspect clear—that it's not just intra-psychic—is this "sensing with soul." We'll return to that.

Now, before we elaborate further some of these elements that I've touched on in this constellation—if we even call it a list—some of these constituent aspects of the imaginal constellation, before we amplify them

a little bit and fill them out and say a bit more about them and also how they might be used as keys or, if you like, ignition points in practice, let's just touch base a little bit about intrapsychic images and say a few things about practicing with them.

A number of people have said to me over the last few years, "I don't get images. Oh, but I don't get images. It sounds really interesting, but I don't get images."

So I have talked about this before—again, this is also something I've talked about in the past. I can't quite remember where. I think it might be in the talks entitled "Orienting, Relating and Tuning to the Imaginal," or something similar, which is in the retreat "Path of the Imaginal." There may be—I don't know how many talks there are—two or three perhaps. I think there's quite a few instructions in there for this kind of thing, and obviously scattered elsewhere. Someone else may know better than I do.

But if we just briefly review some of those possible approaches to kind of open the gates a little bit to the images or stimulate the imaginative faculty, at least, towards images and the imaginal.

So, and again, just rattling through some possibilities because we're really reviewing briefly: There's the possibility of samādhi, some degree of samādhi, dipping into that—however, whatever ways work for you—dipping into that. And again, I mean by samādhi this whole body harmonization and alignment of the energies in the well-being. Dipping into some samādhi, to whatever degree possible, and then kind of just coming out a little bit and slightly relaxing the sort of intense focus, if you like, or grip on that sense of well-being that's the object of the samādhi, and just relaxing that a little bit and sort of just hanging out in that space where there's a relative degree of samādhi but it's more relaxed. That can be a very fertile ground or space for images to arise in.

Similarly, very similarly, some kind of emptiness practice. And again, whatever you know and to whatever depth you sort of develop that. Working with that, with the emptiness, and then again, just backing off, taking the foot off the accelerator, the gas pedal, a little bit, slightly relaxing in that space that has opened up. So both these—with the samādhi and emptiness—really what's happened is we've kind of decreased the fabrication of perception of self and objects, and then kind of loosened the mind just a little bit. So those are two options.

Another is actually to recall a dream figure or a dream scene that has touched you or felt potent in some way. Often it's easiest right after the dream or pretty soon after the dream, say in the morning or something, when it's still alive and the soul resonances are still kind of accessible when you recall the dream figure. And taking up the dream figure as an object of meditation or entering into a meditative exploration of relationship with that dream figure.

Or it might be a previous imaginal figure, something that has ignited for you and felt fertile as an imaginal image in the past. And absolutely, you can just deliberately bring back that image and work with it again. Reconnect in that relationship. See what else needs to happen or just find yourself again in the same kind

of territory. Maybe something different wants to happen. So that's another two possibilities: recalling a dream figure or a previous imaginal figure that has worked for you and deliberately reincarnating it.

There are, of course, a whole host of deliberate meditations on pre-prescribed imaginal figures. Often for those of you who have Vajrayāna backgrounds, there might be Tārā or Avalokiteśvara or many sort of tantric deities, or it could be non-Buddhist, depending on your background, whatever. They're actually prescribed. This is a standard meditation on this figure. And then we enter into—and there are differences between the way we're approaching things and sort of more, let's say, standardly taught Vajrayāna approach.

It could also be a character from history or from literature, a novel, or a film that, again, has touched you, has sparked and grabbed your soul, moved your soul. Again, I've spoken in the past—Nelson Mandela, John Coltrane, I mean, there are many for me, and some purely fictional characters that are potent as images. So that's, again, a very, very beautiful way in.

It could be an actual living person that you know or know of—a friend, a teacher, something else, even a family member, someone in your family who is alive as image for you. Someone was telling me of her grandchildren and the delight there and the eros there and how they came alive as imaginal figures for her. So someone who you know who is alive as image, as imaginal image for you. They're already alive and then you take them—even though they might not be present with you in the room at that time—you bring them, you elicit them, you conjure them in the consciousness and meditate on them as an imaginal figure.

I'm pretty sure I shared a certain technique which was useful to me for quite a while. It's actually imagining deliberately myself descending a staircase—oftentimes it would be a stone or spiral staircase—down into a kind of cell, more like a prison cell, and then waiting there in the dark, and oftentimes different images would appear in that cell. Very beautiful, very fertile.

Or perhaps beneath the foliage of a tree—a big tree, a little tree, a beautiful tree—and sitting or standing under the leaves and the dappled sunlight and the shade there, warm or cool or whatever it is. And in that space, that enchanted space, images can enter or arise or certain encounters can take place.

And again, really, really, really not to overlook the possibility that often when the emotions are quite alive—either in a difficult way, when there's a difficult emotion, when we're struggling with something, or in a lovely way, when there's some very beautiful emotion—there's the energy in the emotionality that can constitute an image. We just have to hang out, open to be with, find ways of being with that emotion, difficult or lovely, in ways that can give birth to images. So I'm hanging out there, open to, connected with, intimate with the energy body, and sensitive to and caring for and receptive to what arises out of that kind of vortex of the emotions and what arises as image or may arise as image. A really important possibility.

And then we can also, for example, deliberately imagine the body in a certain way, or with regard to the

body. So I can deliberately play with imagining my body as a body of light, perhaps a certain colour, or a body of fire, or fire emanating from my body. Or, as Catherine did a beautiful guided meditation on the last retreat there, body as the beloved other and then entering into that body as beloved other with all the senses and all the sensitivity and receptivity. So there's all kinds of possibilities, and I really encourage you to try some of these if it feels like you're one of those people that says, "I don't get images."

Now, I'd like to actually give you an example of a very unremarkable image to make the point that—because sometimes people say, "Oh, I don't get very interesting images," or, "Rob, you describe your images and they're really intense and far out and kind of amazing." I've tried on past retreats to deliberately give both kinds—far-out images, if you like, or kind of intense-sounding images on the one hand, and on the other hand, really not far-out, quite ordinary-sounding images—to really emphasize the fact that, in a way, the remarkability or unremarkability of images is really not that important. It's kind of irrelevant. It may impress your friends if it's something remarkable, but in itself, it doesn't mean much at all.

So not too long ago, I was sitting in meditation and a visual image came up. It was fairly vivid as an image, but it was really unremarkable and very limited in scope. The visual image was of a black suit coat—I don't know what they call it, like what a businessman might wear, a sort of overcoat on a suit. And it was just its lapels. It wasn't even the whole coat—just the lapels, and the white shirt underneath with a kind of dark tie there. And so it was just that for a while.

Of course, initially one thinks, "Well, that's not very interesting." And it wasn't like there was a particular great upsurge of soul resonance or emotion. But just hanging out with it—hang out, not too quick to judge. Just be open, be sensitive, be delicate.

As I stayed with this, it was almost like I'd get more of a sense of the man who was wearing this very standard sort of Western attire of a certain style. I get a sense of him. I don't really see him that much per se, but I just get a sense of him. He's a kind of research scientist. In his inside coat pocket, he has papers, and they contain a theory. He's traveling around with these papers, studying and contemplating this theory on his travels. Sometimes he's alone, and sometimes he's moving around—probably, I don't know, some kind of Western country in Europe and fairly modern, sometime in the nineteenth or twentieth centuries.

Sometimes he meets with others who are similar to him to discuss and share and study these papers, this text together. So there's a very small group of men bound together by this intense focus and passionate involvement and devotion to this study. All this is a kind of sense I get. It's not like I really see all this happening and there's a whole film of him going and meeting all these guys. It's more sort of visual, but certainly not dramatically visual in any intense way. It's more just a sense of his nature—what he is and what he does and what he's about in his story.

I also get the sense that it's not even that they think this theory represents or seeks the truth in some

simple way—like "this is the truth" or "this is the theory of the world." There's something about this theory that's as much a creation, as if it's an art, and there's also something religious or spiritual about it for them. So it's a curious kind of blend—sort of scientific and sort of an artistic creation and sort of religious, all of that. And that goes for their relationship with it. It's a kind of religious spiritual thing. It's an art. It's all of that. It's research.

There are not very many of these people in the world. And it's not secret what they're doing. It's not like some super confidential thing. But they don't really speak or share much about it, or about their devotion and passion. They don't really speak much about that with those who are not interested. And most people are not interested. So they don't really talk about it with most people, basically.

But their focus and their devotion to this exploration, this study, and this sharing together gives their lives a kind of profound sense of alignment and rootedness and a steadiness of depth. And to the extent that something is more important to them than their individual fate, their individual life or death. And again, none of this is very dramatically conveyed in the image. It's just a kind of intuition I have about what is going on there with this man and these people.

I am also, during this image, struck by the fact that these are white men. They're all white men in suits, conservatively dressed. I don't know, is it like the 30s or 40s or 50s? So that strikes me, and I'm not sure how I feel about that, but that's the reality of what appeared.

I'm reminded at the same time of ancient or medieval mystical esoteric texts shared among small and often disparate groups of initiates or seekers and carried on journeys by traveling members of this group or collective. The texts are carried and communicated to each other before the printing press, before pressing send on an email, before all of that. Sometimes it's paper, sometimes it's a sort of paper-bound leaflet or booklet, sometimes it's a dark hardback book. The specific form isn't so important.

Now, the reason I'm saying all that is it doesn't sound very interesting. I imagine it doesn't sound very interesting. It wasn't visually rich as an image—it was a visual image, but there's a lot that wasn't visual in it. It was more like an intuitive sense of who they were and what was going on there. It wasn't visually detailed or rich or complex. And the effect on the energy body was definitely not dramatic. Sometimes it can be really dramatic, the sense of alignment or release or energization that comes into the energy body with an image that really resonates with your soul. So it really wasn't dramatic, but it was there. There was an effect on the energy body.

I can't remember, actually—I can't tell or decide: was I in the image as one of them, or was I kind of outside just watching them and in a soul relationship with them?

So very unremarkable, probably not very interesting if one tells one's friends such an image, but imaginal nevertheless. Why? Because of the soul resonances it had for me, which were quite subtle. Again, not dramatic, not fireworks, not shooting flames and all that business—but the soul resonances and the kind

of reciprocal, infinite echoing and mirroring of the image and the imaginal characters with currents of my life, currents of my soul. Some of you will obviously recognize that in the image.

But the point is, images don't need to be dramatic, intense, vivid visually, or remarkable, unusual, far out, et cetera, to be imaginal. On the other hand, we can have very remarkable, vivid, intense and dramatic images that are not imaginal.

So here's an example of one like that. I'm sitting in meditation and suddenly a snake appears. And it's very vivid—a very vivid visual image and very intense. Its presence is very intense, right there, like its head or its hood, like a cobra, is right face to face with me. But I can't quite relate to it somehow. It actually doesn't feel imaginal. What's not there? A sense of beauty, a sense of meaningfulness, a sense of dimensionality, divinity. These are not obvious. Nor is my energy body signaling a soul-making engagement. So I'm a little bit puzzled, but really struck by the vividness.

And I sort of ask it—but not necessarily as a formal question—try and get a sense, you know, what does it want? What do you want in relationship to it? Again, that doesn't need to be a formal question. Sometimes that can be a little too clunky as a technique.

And the snake says something like, "To burn you or to burn through you." It wants to burn me or to burn through me, which means to hollow me out through its fire breath. It breathes fire, the snake, which it then instantaneously does. So that's a really dramatic, intense thing. Suddenly this vivid image, and it wants to burn through me, and then it just does that, and I kind of disappear.

So there you have pretty remarkable, very vivid, visually intense, dramatic. There's even talking going on, all of which can sound really impressive.

But it wasn't imaginal.

Another aspect that was missing there was love and also trust. What happened over a little time—I think it took a few sessions—was that I started playing with a few elements. This is the kind of thing we'll come back to later and amplify a little bit: playing with a few elements or gently allowing the possibility or looking for a few elements like love, like trust, or introducing them a little bit. I was also aware of the dependent arising of the image. We've talked about this before—when I introduce just a little bit of trust, the image actually, if you like, is shaped by that trust. Image is always—an imaginal image is always a dependent arising. We're not overlooking that fundamental dharma insight.

So it was only then that it began—still, it took a little time—to become more imaginal. I won't go into what happened right now, but I will say one more thing: I didn't trust it. It did this thing with its fire breath and disappeared me and said, "I want to burn you or burn through you." And I sort of said, "Why?" And it said, "So you can live forever." I was very suspicious. It's like, that's a very strange-sounding thing. Something about it I didn't trust—actually quite a number of things about it I really didn't trust.

So it wasn't imaginal at that point. It didn't have the beauty, the meaningfulness, dimensionality, divinity, love—all of that, despite the vividness, intensity, and all that remarkability of it. But in time and with practice, it did become imaginal, opened up, and was actually quite fertile.

Again, repeating things I've said before, but it seems important because of how often I hear people say things which makes me think they haven't quite grasped this aspect or that aspect of what's important here: An image in our sense, despite the way we tend to hear that word in our language, is not necessarily visual. Any of the senses could be primary, not just sight. It could be hearing or the kinesthetic sense or touch or smell, taste, whatever, or something we can't even quite put our finger on. How is it I'm sensing this? But an imaginal image is not necessarily visual.

When we're—again, I'm trying to address someone who says, "I don't get images"—oftentimes what happens is a person dismisses what comes up as a potential image too quickly. So I could have easily dismissed the image of that suit lapel, the lapels of the suit with the tie. It really wasn't that interesting. It hardly registered as being interesting at all. But really, don't dismiss too quickly. Because something that appears insignificant or appears—"Oh, I just made that up"—don't worry about whether you think your ego has made it up or whether it feels like it's not interesting or it's insignificant or it's just the tail end of a daydream. Don't dismiss too quickly. Stay with it a little bit and see what can be worked with, what happens when you hang out, when you come into a different kind of relationship with it.

So we have to be patient, both in a session if we're trying to work with imaginal practice, and also over time, with the development of this practice. But really what we're talking about is that with imaginal—again, it's more a way of paying attention and being with that constitutes the imaginal. If you allow something that might seem insignificant, uninteresting, a total mental fabrication of some element of me that is not even that profound or interesting—it's the way of paying attention to and being with that that oftentimes is the most important, to allow that germ, that seed, to become something imaginal, to gain that dimensionality and beauty and meaningfulness and all of that echoing.

I think I've said this before—I've definitely said it to some individuals who were quite surprised when I said it—but I don't think I am a natural. I don't naturally have a super imaginative faculty that just churns out images and all that. I don't consider that the case at all for myself. I'm not a natural. Some people really are—images come very easily to them. That's not me.

But what I can be, and what I was in the initial stages of developing this—and I still very much feel that I'm developing this, that I'm learning, that I'm expanding—what I can be, rather than being a natural, is I can be patient, I can be dedicated, I can be curious, I can experiment and play, and I can notice: "Oh, that's interesting—when I experiment like this, that happened. Oh, that's interesting." And I can ponder.

So bringing those qualities to bear, something gradually—it really took some time, and it's still very much developing for me—something begins to develop, to accrue, something starts to come together. A facility starts to emerge and get founded and flower and blossom and unfold and take you places.

So it may well be—and if I think for myself, it was the case—that I did use certain techniques at first. I ran through them briefly before: descending a staircase to a cell and waiting there, recalling a dream figure, all of that. I did use that at first, and you might need to at first if you're one of these people who says, "I feel something in me calling when I hear about these practices, but I just don't seem to get any images."

So go ahead, use some techniques at first. No matter what James Hillman said about that, I would judge it by the results rather than being suspicious of your ego, suspicious of technique. Techniques at first might be helpful. What we're looking for is the soul-making.

We use the soul-making as the indicator. I sense that I'm on the right track. I can smell it. I can feel the eros. I feel the resonances. But techniques at first, and then in time it becomes more just a mode of being, if you like. The imaginal is opened by this mode of being that we just move in and out of with kind of less fuss and fanfare. It's something that we just glide in and out of in our lives. It becomes more of an art rather than a technique. It's more a matter of attunement, receptivity, flexibility, play, discovery, all of that. But sometimes we need the techniques at first.

Some people need, like myself, the techniques at first or different approaches that you might discover for yourself to kind of get into the territory a little bit and then develop it. And even if they're not fully imaginal, genuinely imaginal, as we said before, it gets you into the territory and then you can start working with that, as we'll fill out more as we go through this first group of talks.

Sometimes we might be trying too hard to kind of get an image or receive an image. And maybe what's needed is we just need a little more sensitivity and attention, without pressure—sensitivity and attention to perhaps a pain or a lack or confusion we're feeling. And we do that with the energy body or just paying attention to the energy body and just dwelling in the energy body, as we've emphasized on the retreats. Just hanging out there. It's really good practice. Even if no image comes, just this skill and facility and familiarity with the energy body is so helpful in so many ways and for so many practices.

Sometimes we're trying too hard to get an image. Just let it go. Let that whole attempt go and just go into some samādhi to develop the well-being, nurture the well-being in the energy body, whatever way you know how, or some emptiness practices if you know those. As I've mentioned in the past, we want to alternate. No one's going to be doing imaginal practice all day long—the balance would be off there. So we want to move in and out of other practices which really put down images, let them go, let them quiet, let them fade, come into something simpler, some emptiness, some basic mindfulness practice.

Maybe sometimes what we need to do, when we're trying too hard for an image, is just loosen the mind and let it drift for a while. Yes, let it drift. Just let it drift. Just with a light mindfulness, just let the mind drift a while. And sometimes out of that an image emerges.

And maybe sometimes we need to stop meditating and realize or notice that an imaginal image is sometimes already existing for us in our lives—in how we see our lives, or again, the persons in our lives,

or certain persons in our lives at times, or ourself, or our endeavors, or activities. It's already there. The images or the fantasies that run through our life—I don't need meditation to find them. They're already in my life. All I need is a certain kind of understanding and a certain kind of awareness to notice what they are.

Where there's inspiration, there's fantasy, there's image. Where there's love, where there's dedication, there's fantasy, there's image. And when we start picking up on them outside of formal meditation, then I can maybe get a sense of what they are and take them, if I want to, into the formal meditation.

You here now can also be seen imaginally. Not something other—you, here, now, can become image, can become imaginal image. So, for example, even the image of oneself humbly, reverently waiting for an image, and maybe even slightly frustrated. And then it's the way of relating to that, the way of seeing that—that itself becomes imaginal. The self, sitting here, waiting, whatever it is, walking up and down, becomes image. Self-practicing becomes image.

Or the inquiry, your inquiry, your dedication in asking a question, your aliveness, your longing to know, to open, to understand. This too can become image. It's nothing different, but what is going on, just seen differently, becomes imaginal image.

Or a conversation with a teacher or with a fellow practitioner—the very conversation becomes image, or the memory of the conversation becomes image. It's almost like realizing something about it or seeing it in a certain way, opening to certain aspects of it that we might have not allowed or not caught the scent of.

Even yourself confused or having difficulties on the path, but still earnest in one's attempts and one's dedication and one's efforts. That too can become image. This confusion, this difficulty that the self is experiencing, and the self that is experiencing that difficulty, but still showing up—that too can become beautiful poetry and image, an imaginal image of meaningfulness and depth and divinity and all of it.

So an image can be—nothing's actually appearing different. The image of the body doesn't appear as blue light or this or that or with flames shooting out or anything else. It's just the body as it usually appears.

But it doesn't appear differently. It's sensed, if you like, in relation with or surrendered to or given to divinity. All these possibilities—the self, another, an object, the world, our eros—each of these can become imaginal without something different being introduced as the image.

We don't need necessarily something like a pink rabbit suddenly appearing to the mind, spewing forth profound and pithy and bizarre Zen utterances. This here now, very ordinary looking to one view, and quite fathomless and pregnant with meaning and with beauty and with poetry to another view. Nothing, no different object, if you like, is in the consciousness or made to be the image or introduced as image.

When there is humility and the softening or opening of the heart, when there's even just a little less fabrication, when there's a certain looseness and openness of the perception and the perceptual grasping,

when there's a delicacy of sensitivity, when there's the whole energy body awareness—all these together, and other factors, support the opening to the imaginal.

So it's less about getting an image than something in the stance of the being, in the mode of the being, in the way of looking, in the relationship with what is here now in the material world. Certain factors, certain elements, constituents come into that, and they together support the opening to the imaginal, the opening of the mundus imaginalis, the world of the imaginal.

This here, now, is image, or it becomes imaginal. It can be imaginal when related to in a certain way.

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