Aspects of the Imaginal (Part 5)

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All right, if we continue with our list of elements and aspects of the imaginal and of sensing the soul—and I think you'll probably almost certainly have gotten the sense by now that you should take my counting of the elements on this list with a large grain of salt—I think this is number twelve, depending on how you count and how you slice things up. So number twelve. I'm not quite sure what to call this, but let's call it "fullness of intention" for now.

Now this is related—you'll hear—to many of the previous elements. In fact, they're all related, but this one is more obviously related to many of the previous elements: grace, reverence, humility, divinity, duty, and so forth. In a way, we could say that it's perhaps implicit in the fullness of the meaning of those elements, but we want to draw it out. I think it's helpful and worthwhile to draw it out as something standing on its own—or rather, separate it out as if it were standing on its own, when it's not.

The reason I'm choosing to speak again about drawing out and delineating these lists is partly just in response to what has come back to us so far in terms of what we hear people not quite understanding, or things they've heard but perhaps weren't clear about, or they forgot or overlooked. So this choice of going through the list in this way is basically a response to the sense we're getting from people who are working with this material. And partly, as I said, it's helpful to draw these elements out because it will contribute to our understanding, but also our sensitivity and discernment, and also to the art of practice and our kind of finesse there—our subtlety, our art.

So number twelve: fullness of intention. Now this itself has two parts or two aspects or two dimensions. It's interesting—as I was reflecting on it, I don't know that this is something that we so much notice, and in the noticing of it, it ignites the other factors. But it's something that we may be able to focus on as we're working, or working with an image, or with a certain sensing of soul, and then kind of wiggle it, jiggle it a little bit—open up or bolster it or deepen this dimension of filling out the intention, letting the intentionality fill out. So it might be more that an activity is implied in this node rather than just a sort of noticing it. That may be the case.

So, two aspects of this, two parts. And the first is—well, they're both actually relative to the subjective pole. In other words, my part of the relationship or attitude to the imaginal figure, the imaginal object, the perception that I'm sensing with soul. It may be, as we get really deep into this, that one perceives it's actually also an element of the object itself, of the objective pole of the relationship, of the imaginal constellation.

But this first part of this fullness of intention—and I've mentioned it already—is that my relationship or

attitude... the intention there is not primarily, not primarily in the service of my growth, my spiritual growth, my empowerment or whatever it is, my psychological growth, my healing even, or my psycho-spiritual process. It may be that that intention is mixed in there. It certainly is the case that these kinds of things will be endemic. They will grow with the imaginal. They are gifts of the imaginal relationship as it deepens. But the intention is not primarily in the service of that. It's not primarily for my growth, my empowerment, my psychological or spiritual process, my healing.

So I mentioned this before, but it's quite radical. It's quite rare as well. People often use certain language, but when you just ask a little bit or hear a bit more what their relationship really is, it often is in the service of self-growth. And it can be a bit almost baffling to the modern mind often to conceive of some other kind of intention in this regard.

So again, I don't want to overwhelm you or have you feel like, "Well, the bar is just set so high here for what you're talking about, Rob. I don't know if I've ever come close to that." There is a natural evolution in practicing with images and bringing all this to bear, so that even if this particular piece feels like, "Hmm, I'm not there yet," or "I don't think that's really the case for me"—remember, there's a spectrum. There's a spectrum of skillful uses of the imagination, and it kind of gets more and more into what we might call the fully or authentically imaginal. So we're on that spectrum, and we're just interested in encouraging the movement to that fuller, more genuine, more authentic end.

And there is a natural evolution. In other words, if we begin to love this kind of practice, this kind of work, if we begin to start to understand some of the ideas and begin to work with it in practice, there will be a natural evolution over time towards the intentionality being primarily for soul-making. Soul-making is the primary intention for engaging with the imaginal, in relationship with the imaginal other, the imaginal figure, in sensing with soul. Soul-making is the primary intention.

Another way of putting that—and I think I did focus on this in some talks at the beginning of the Re-enchanting the Cosmos retreat—is practicing for the sake of God, for the sake of divinity, not for myself. And we can easily adopt that phrase, but actually a genuine opening or shift or deepening or filling out of the intention is actually quite rare. So, so beautiful. And so transformative, in fact. But as I said, there is a natural evolution. If we get into it, eventually something in all this works its magic and that becomes the primary intention, the primary reason why we're doing all this. And there are lots of other gifts too.

But the primary reason is the soul loves soul-making. And we love that and we want that almost, in fact, more than anything else. We're practicing for the sake of God, in the service of the God, in the service of divinity, in the service of Buddha nature.

Okay, so that's the first part of this fullness of intention. That this is not primarily for me and my process and my growth or whatever it is.

The second part is kind of related, but it's to say that the intention in being for soul-making is more than just an intention for heartfulness or for passionate living. So sometimes people... I sometimes get the sense that a person has elevated those qualities and either mistaken them for soulfulness or just kind of fixated on those qualities in their life as being of paramount importance in the way that they relate to organize their life or their practice or what they select out from what's most meaningful to them in the world, in relationships, in stories, etc.

So what we mean here is if the intention is for soul-making, it's more than just for the sake of a rich and deep and intense emotional life, beautiful and lovely as that is and beneficial as that is. It's more than just a kind of elevation of feeling passionate or passionate engagement. Again, necessary, beautiful, lovely and fruitful as that is. It's more also than only a wanting of eros, or eros only, in the kind of small sense, in the sense of, "I like this feeling of eros, I like the juiciness, I like the fire, I like the engagement, I like the passion, I like the aliveness of it, and the buzz and all that," in the small sense.

Eros in the big sense, if you remember back to the talks, we explained this in quite a lot of depth. If eros is allowed to do its thing fully, it automatically inseminates, involves, fertilizes, extends the psyche and the logos and lots of other things too. And so then we can talk about eros in the big sense as an element of that larger and more involved dynamic that does involve psyche, does involve logos, etc.

If the intention is just for the buzz of aliveness and the juiciness and the fire of eros in its more isolated sense, without it really including the range of what is impregnated and catalyzed in the eros-psyche-logos dynamic, then that too is not full enough of intention. And certainly not a desire just for sex. Or, again, if it's a desire for the pleasure, the delight in the soul-making and the eros. Again, it's not full enough. Or a desire for an intention for fascinating images. It's endlessly fascinating, like what might come up. Great, wonderful, extremely rich, bountiful things. Certainly interesting, but in itself, it's too small as an intention, finally.

So the intention for soul-making in a more fuller sense includes all that, what we've just been through: emotion, passion, eros in its smaller sense, pleasure, delight, fascinating images, all that. But it also includes eros in the larger sense, which includes logos in terms of understanding. Something is being pushed on and extended and enriched and deepened and complicated in the understanding, that whole dynamic, with all that sense of dimensionality and divinity, all that.

In other words, eros in its small sense, for example, a fascinating image, might not be so pregnant with that sense of dimensionality and divinity and really all the elements that we're talking about. So sometimes people, again, it's slightly personality style, it's slightly a cultural sort of influence or conditioning, but sometimes people love the eros, love the images, and kind of forget a little bit about the logos, where it doesn't yet quite land and open as something really important and really fertile aspect of the whole dynamic or fertile dimension of soul.

Logos, in the sense of understanding, conception, the stretching, the enriching of that, is itself an aspect of

soul. We love that logoistic element of soul-making as much, eventually, as we love any of the other aspects: the delight, the eros, the vitality, the juiciness, etc.

And I've also said in some other talks, I think it was primarily on *Eros Unfettered*, that the logos is also important for balancing and stabilizing with the images and intense energy and all that. That conceptual structure, having a conceptual structure that's actually adequate, can bring a lot of wisdom into the proceedings and understand how to attenuate things or respond to things or what to emphasize, what to seek out, etc. But also in itself provides, in its structure, balance and stability.

So in this second part of this fullness of intention, we're not limiting what we're aiming for. It's bigger, it's wider, it's more inclusive than just those more limited elements, wonderful as they might be and kind of vitalizing as they may be. All of them that we went through—emotion, emotionality, passion, eros in the small sense, pleasure, delight, fascinating images, whatever—they are all, in one way or another, elements of soul-making or subsidiary to soul-making, if you like. Sometimes very obviously, sometimes a little bit obliquely or more obscurely or less concretely.

I'll throw one more thing in there, because it may be—or I'm wondering, it may be—however, as a qualification to what I just have been through, maybe that the desire for one of these elements, for instance, passion... So one can become kind of passionate about passion and interested in it and seek it out. And if the desire for one of those elements, those sort of subsidiary elements, I wonder if that particular desire is allowed and pursued with intelligence, intelligently pursued and fully pursued, whether it itself won't inevitably open up to the other aspects of soul-making and naturally evolve into a more full intentionality for the fullness of soul-making.

Do you understand? It's one thing. The soul's got hold of one thing. Let's say it's passion, and it's enamored with passion, and it's interested in passion. And if it follows that interest, and that connection, and that desire for passion, and inquires into, what is it that allows me to have a fuller passion, if that's what I want? I'm on the arrow of desire, but I'm pursuing it with intelligence, with rigor, in fact. And allowing and riding that, but inquiring into what allows it, what allows passion to be full and rich and multidimensional and multidirectional and all of that.

And eventually the passion itself, that singular arrow, will open up in the whole field of soul-making. At least I'm wondering if that's the case, and I have a strong suspicion that it is. But in itself, it may well be too limited. And an aspect of, let's say, the more fully imaginable, that end of the spectrum, is this fullness of intention in those two parts that we said.

So that would be number twelve, I think.

Number 13, roughly, autonomy, the autonomy of the imaginal other, the imaginal object. Now, I've talked a lot about this. I think it was right from the beginning in Theatre of Selves and things like that, and I keep stressing it.

So, to me this is very interesting. Actually, this number 13 is autonomy and twoness, but two things we've talked about before, the twoness much more in the last couple of retreats, but autonomy and twoness. So, what does that mean? It means that the imaginal figure or the object, the other perceived, sensed with soul, if it's something in our material world or another in our material world, has an autonomy. It's independent of me. We get a sense of it. It's not kind of a part of me or an aspect of me. I can't reduce it to that.

This is interesting in a number of ways. One is that, in the way I would like to lay out the whole logos of this work, we never lose sight of the fact that any perception, including an imaginal perception, an imaginal other, whatever it is, is anything other than a dependent arising. All perception is sensing with soul or imaginal or regular material perception, whatever it is, in the mind, it's all a dependent arising. So somehow acknowledging the dependent arising of things, and that's a kind of unshakable base of the larger logos that I would put out there. But somehow within that, we get a sense of the independence of this thing.

So again here we have, right in this notion of autonomy, we have a kind of straddling or bridging of two apparently contradictory attitudes, understandings, relationships. On the one hand, we see its dependent arising. On the other, we sense or feel it or allow it to manifest to us as independent. You could say the way of looking and the way of conceiving grants the imaginal other or the object sensed with soul a sense of autonomy and independence. It doesn't feel right or true to just reduce it to an aspect or a part of me or my psychology. It's not reducible.

Extending that a little bit, we could say that this autonomy, when it's allowed its fullness of autonomy, what it really means is we begin to recognize and become alive to the personhood of the imaginal figure. Or the personhood of anything we are perceiving, sensing with soul. It could be a tree, it could be a piece of land, it could be my own body. And we think, well, that's a part of me. But actually, once we get into sensing our own body with soul, the body itself begins to have its own intelligence, its own agency, its own intention, its own soul. You understand? So we're entering what I've talked about before on other retreats. We're talking about the autonomy within the intersubjective field. An intersubjective field. Two subjects get established or filled out. Me and the imaginal other.

So it's as if there's a sense of respect for and a sensitivity to and a relationship between two souls there. So this is of course related to this twoness that we've been talking about on a couple of recent retreats and emphasizing. Sensing with soul, imaginal perception does not, for the most part, for the most part, does not collapse things or dissolve things or merge or melt things into oneness. There are exceptions to that. I've been through all this on recent retreats. But generally speaking, it doesn't do that. It preserves twoness. So imaginal perception, sensing with soul, preserves twoness.

Now there's a lot to this, but as an example, I was out for a walk on Dartmoor a few months ago, in fact, in the summer. And I'm walking on a lovely area there. And the image arose as I was walking of many, many

kind of thick, muscular tentacles rising up from the earth that I was walking on, rising up, these thick, muscular tentacles, almost like giant reptilian sort of octopus tentacles. They're like a foot wide, each of them a foot wide, many, many of them, rising up to claim me, to capture me. One would think to suck me down would be the initial impulse, but really they were just rising up, countless of them, and densely covering the land, the Earth's surface, around me, at least.

Now, if we're not careful, this could be construed, such an image—and by the way, it was very, very delightful, very sort of rapturous image in both senses. It was very blissful in that sense, rapturous, but also sensed as a rapture, a seizing from the earth, but instead of the usual rapture, people tend to think it's up, it was down, down and earthy, rather than up and ethereal. But usually we might construe that kind of image out of dharma or spiritual habits or habitual teachings that we're used to as an image kind of indicating oneness or a move towards union, dissolution in the earth below, a kind of oneness emerging with that rather than with the spirit above.

Yes, we can see the difference—it's down and earthy rather than up and ethereal—but we might tend to suppose that it's an image portending or indicating or signaling or initiating union, movement towards oneness. But the image did not proceed forward in time to a dissolving union. And I've been through this before—imaginal images are most often not what I call narrative, moving in time, but iconic.

Again, there are many exceptions, but they are, if you like, almost static, eternal moments, despite the dynamism and energy implied in them or present in images such as this one. There's something timeless—I'm going to come back to this eternality of images later as an element on our list.

So if we see this image of the tentacles claiming me for what it is, rather than through the typical assumptions of union or dissolution or a kind of dharma that prioritizes that movement towards union, dissolution, fading, and so forth—that whole spectrum as the primary aim of spiritual endeavor—if we resist that temptation of the typical lenses, then you actually see that what stands out in this image is the twoness. It's the earth and me in relationship. There's relationship there. There's both twoness and eros, and there's not the dissolution, but twoness and eros are captured in or through the image.

There might be more than two, actually. There might be many, because I'm not sure now whether it was many or just the earth—many tentacles, many others, or just the earth. And also what's noticeable is the power of the autonomous desire of the earth, the eros of the earth. It was the earth's eros. In other words, there was two there. It—the earth, she, he, it—had its own eros. Its desire was autonomous, and that was also vividly sensed in the image. It was not my desire. There's two there. There's autonomy.

So eros, as I said, sustains twoness. Generally speaking, there are exceptions—I've been through it before. But more than that, eros and soul-making needs twoness. It needs two. It takes two for eros. It takes two to soul-make. And further—we've explained all this before—eros and soul-making will create and discover twonessess, othernesses, in an ongoing way. More and more twoness, more and more otherness. Eros needs to and also creates and discovers twonessess, othernesses, in an open-ended way.

Now, otherness is actually already a given of our existence. We sense othernesses. We sense otherness. There's a sense of self, there's a sense of other. Even if we know and perceive fundamental oneness—and one knows unshakably the fundamental oneness of all things and can have a vivid, palpable, deep, mystical sense of that oneness, at whatever level it is (there are different kinds of oneness, I've explained all this before)—it's still the case that phenomenally or phenomenologically, others appear to us. Otherness appears to us. Perception delineates othernesses. Otherwise we wouldn't be able to move in the world. We wouldn't know how to function. We wouldn't be able to operate anything. We wouldn't be able to go to the toilet. We wouldn't be able to eat. All that.

So perception delineates at a very basic level othernesses, otherness. This is already a given, an aspect of the way consciousness works and must work. But the thing about eros is that it creates and discovers—or eros, as it's allowed to catalyze and ignite this whole soul-making dynamic of eros, psyche, logos, and all that—will create and discover more othernesses.

This doesn't mean more distance, more alienation between self and other. It's not the same as unskillful fabrication, building more dukkha. But there will be an ongoing creation and discovery of more and more dimensions, more and more particulars, more and more images, more and more aspects within a beloved object, a thing, a being scented with soul.

We've been through all that before.

Now there's something I'd like to add here that perhaps I haven't emphasized so much before, so I want to draw that out. So autonomy and two-ness. There's the autonomy of the other, the autonomy of the imaginal other, the autonomy of the other sensed with soul. But also there is implicit in that, and worth drawing out, the autonomy of the self, the autonomy of the subject. In other words, here I am in this imaginal world, this perception, engaging in relationship with this imaginal other, but I also have some autonomy there.

So very often, and related to a lot of what we've said, even in this talk so far, the things that we perceive soulfully, when we sense with soul ourselves, our life, our circumstances, or some perception opens up, or an imaginal figure—all of that can seem, in the realm of soul-making, in the realm of soulfulness, that it is given, that it has a kind of necessity. So this imaginal figure—and I've talked a lot about this, again, I think right from the start—this sense of the necessity of this imaginal figure, even with all its seeming craziness or perhaps pathology or whatever it is, and I don't understand it fully or it puzzles me, it seems like soul is giving us something.

And this is related to these ideas about claim and duty. And even when we sense our lives and the elements of our life and the events of our life and the paths of our lives, sometimes we can get the sense of necessity there too. My illness, maybe, I don't know, my death. When we're sensing with soul, this is a face of, or a sense within that of being given something, of something being a necessity, and that it asks of us something. There's a claim there and duty.

But the other side there, balancing it, is that we are, in relation to imaginal objects and in relation to imaginal figures and whatever objects sensed with soul and whatever it is—we are free. At the same time as there's a necessity and something is given to us and we're just the recipients, we are also free to act, to choose, to intend, to steer, to adopt ways of looking and attitudes and thoughts, conceptions and conceptual frameworks, ideas that either move us deeper into the soul-making, or less, or this way, or that way.

So there's this curious kind of, again, straddling or balance between two views: the givenness, the necessity of what comes to us from soul, let's put it that way, and our freedom to steer, guide, enter into, hold a certain attitude, adopt a certain attitude, to choose, to intend. So this is something that—yeah, I think it's a very significant aspect of the whole soul-making business.

It's related a little bit, I want to linger on this just a little while, it's related a little bit to ethics, actually, and values. So I'll explain—I'll try to be brief, and I may well come back to this in the future, but I'll try to be brief now.

Implicit in or fundamental to the very possibility of ethics—in other words, just the whole idea of ethics, of right and wrong and choosing rightly or wrongly—fundamental and implicit to that is the perspective of the possibility of free will. No free will, the whole realm of philosophy of ethics is pointless. It's like human beings can't choose. So the perspective of the possibility of our free will is fundamental and implicit in the very possibility of any ethical discussion.

Because if everything, every response or feeling or intention, impulse is totally conditioned, if we solely adopt that view, that everything I think, all my responses—if I hate something, if I desire something, any feeling I have, all that is just conditioned from past history and present input from the environment and from others—if I just have that view, that everything is conditioned that way, then there can be no possibility of making ethical choices, right?

That's implicit when we hear ethical stories that move us, for instance. A beautiful passage from Viktor Frankl's Man's Search for Meaning, when he talks about being in Auschwitz, being in the concentration camps, and he says something—excuse me, I won't say it so well, but he says something like: we who lived through the camps, we remember those who had nothing, had almost nothing, who were sick and weary and in the same boat as we were. And yet they went around giving away their last piece of bread, comforting, consoling others. And they bear testament. Such acts that human beings are capable of bear witness to the fact that you can take everything away from a human being except their freedom to choose their own way. Whatever the circumstances are, there is that freedom. And the beauty of that—we can choose what is noble, what we value, we can choose what we feel deeply is right, and that can transcend any other concern in our life.

So I hope to come back to this area, as I said, but I just want to say a little bit now. So the question of free will versus determinism—it's kind of an open one, and I'll say a couple of things about that. All we can say

at this point, I think, is that neither extreme view, that of complete determination or conditionality—everything is just conditioned, all my impulses, all my thoughts, all my feelings—or that of a total free will—I'm always completely free and I am the one who's solely responsible, I'm purely self-determined—I don't think we can at this point really say either of those is solely or ultimately true.

And in any particular situation, the exact balance, the exact mix or relationship of those inputs from, so to speak, the self and from, so to speak, conditions, is too complex to fathom. They are, however, therefore, both available to us—both these views, the view of self-determination, self-choice, and the view of conditionality—they're available to us separately as views, or together, kind of fused, if they're held lightly as perspectives. And there are also views that go beyond both of them.

So emptiness to me and no-self—that teaching doesn't stop at just "everything is just conditions, you're just a process of conditioned elements, conditioned from your past and conditioned from the environment. And so there's no self, there's no self-choice, there's no free will." Conditions too are empty. Any of those kind of dots or elements you might want to say are the conditioning factors, when probed, they are recognized to be empty too.

So there's a whole view even beyond these two. And people often get a little—I feel a little silly with this insistence that there's no such thing as free will. It's too extreme a view and it just doesn't bear honest, authentic introspection.

The idea or the view that there is no free will, that everything is dependent on conditions, is a skillful view to adopt at certain times. It can really help with blame, and I've talked and written about this before. It's a way of looking, skillful at times. At other times, the view of free will is skillful. They're kind of opposite, both true and both adoptable. So I think it's really important to bring some intelligence here and some actual honesty and discernment, actual clarity of seeing.

Sometimes you get certain spiritual schools or even within Buddhism that kind of lean way too much on this insistence that there is no free will. Not only is it a little short-sighted and not particularly intelligent, but it's also not very beautiful. It doesn't open up much beauty. Neither does it open up much soul-making potential, which is the connection I want to make.

Because, just like ethics, soul-making needs a perspective of the possibility, to some extent, of individual free will. And, at the same time, a view that, to some extent, regards the circumstance of our lives and our individuality and the imaginal figures that come to us as given to us by the soul, by the God, by divinity, by Buddha nature, whatever words we want to use.

Soul-making needs a perspective of the possibility of both—to some extent, individual free will, and to some extent, this givenness of our lives, of our circumstances, of our fate, of the images that come.

It is in this balance of self and other, really the balance of the autonomies of self and imaginal figure, while the two are at the same time somehow not separate. It's in that balance and that kind of straddling

again, the balance of self and other, both autonomies and at the same time somehow not separate. It's in that mix or balance or kind of meta-view, if you like, that soul-making and imaginal practice is possible and fertile.

So the autonomy of self and the autonomy of other. Soul draws us—there is a telos that we can sense in the way soul draws us, or draws us on, or towards something, or in hindsight we can see that. Soul gives us our circumstances, our individuality, the trajectory of our lives, our fate, our images. And at the same time, we assent with our free will. We have to assent to soul-making.

So all this relates to another element—a deep and central notion which I've mentioned before—of participation. And it's all wrapped up in that, in a sense. We participate in soul, we participate in the divine, we participate in all the dimensions of our being. Aspects of our being participate in the divine or in soul or in the Buddha nature, in the imaginal other.

This notion of participation, a very deep notion—one of the beauties of it is it preserves an autonomy in a sense of non-separation. The idea of participation preserves an autonomy and a sense of non-separation. We'll come back to that.

But the very word, even, soul-making—soul-making implies, in the suffix, in the "making" bit, implies agency in doing. Soul-making. Agency in doing is not, in other words, a completely passive receiving that is involved in soul-making. We receive, we're given, but we also need to do and adopt and relate in certain ways. We assent to soul-making, as I said, and our free will is involved in that.

So the two-ness of soul-making, of imaginal work, of sensing the soul, preserves, to some extent, my autonomy, the subject's autonomy, as well as that, for example, of the imaginal figure, of the other. It preserves, emphasizes, requires my choosing, my will, my consciously orienting, my deliberately considering and viewing and adopting a certain way of looking and stance.

Okay, number 14 on our list. Many of these elements, perhaps you've already heard how some of them are implicit in each other, or you could say, well, that's part of that or whatever. Others, if you like, qualify each other. This is an aspect of the soul-making. This is an aspect of sensing the soul. This is an aspect of the imaginal constellation, at the same time as that which is opposite to this is as well.

So many of these elements kind of interpenetrate, many of them kind of qualify each other or balance each other or give complexity to the richness of paradox. That's maybe a good way of putting it—paradoxical implications, apparently self-contradictory relationships between some of these elements.

So, number 14: We've said already that despite the dependent origination, there's one paradox already—despite the dependent origination, there is the sense of and the granting of independence and autonomy of the imaginal other, the object-sense of the soul. And yet, number 14: the boundaries are not definite.

The boundaries are not definite. Indefinite boundaries is the 14th element on our list. Boundaries between the subject, the self, if you like, and the other or the imaginal figure—that boundary is not a definite boundary. But also the boundaries of the other, the object sensed with soul, the imaginal figure, and in fact of any soul-making delineation.

So it is with the boundaries of being. When we contemplate other human beings, there's this natural sense of soft edges, of their being extending into mystery, into depths that cannot be fully fathomed. And the same applies to ourselves - when we truly introspect, we don't encounter solid boundaries but rather a sense of extending into unfathomable dimensions.

This quality of indefinite boundaries in the imaginal realm becomes even more pronounced. The imaginal figure or object-sense sensed with soul doesn't end abruptly but rather fades gradually into mystery, into what cannot be fully grasped or defined. Like music that seems to blend with the silence that surrounds it, or like the way a beloved face in memory seems to extend beyond its visual contours into realms of meaning and relationship that have no clear edges.

These soft edges are also elastic. They can expand or contract depending on the quality of attention we bring, the depth of our engagement, the resonance of the moment. Sometimes the imaginal figure seems to fill all of awareness; other times it feels more contained while still maintaining that essential quality of extending beyond definite limits.

This elasticity reveals something crucial about the nature of imaginal perception. We're not dealing with fixed entities but with living realities that breathe and pulse with the rhythms of consciousness itself. The boundaries stretch and contract like the membrane of a living cell, permeable and responsive to the movements of soul.

And here's what's particularly significant: we actually sense these soft, elastic edges. This isn't just a conceptual understanding but a felt reality. When we bring attention to the edges of an imaginal figure, we can perceive how they blur into infinity, how they extend into dimensions that our ordinary perception cannot map. This sensing of the indefinite boundary is itself part of the imaginal experience, part of what makes it numinous and alive.

This quality of soft edges allows for something that rigid boundaries would prevent - the interpenetration of being, the sense that the imaginal other is both distinct and mysteriously connected to ourselves and to the larger web of existence. The imaginal figure maintains its autonomy and independence while simultaneously participating in the fluid dance of consciousness.

When we recognize and attune to these indefinite boundaries, the whole experience deepens. The imaginal becomes more fully itself precisely because we're not trying to contain it within sharp definitions. We're allowing it the space to extend into mystery, to participate in the unfathomable dimensions of being that are its natural habitat.

This is why conventional approaches to imagery or visualization often feel flat or mechanical - they assume definite boundaries, trying to construct clear, contained images rather than allowing for this essential quality of extending into the unknown. True imaginal perception honors the soft-edged nature of these realities, creating space for the mystery to breathe.

The edges are blurred—the bottom, the top, the sides—they're soft, and they're elastic. We can explore this simply by paying attention to the sense of self, the sense of another human being, the sense of anything really. It's also possible with animals, non-humans, and even material things. Just be present with the sense of this thing. It's harder with material objects, but with enough meditative depth and acumen, this quality will emerge.

So here we have element number fourteen: boundaries that are indefinite, soft-edged, and elastic. A thing has elastic edges. A human being obviously has elastic edges as well—a human being can grow. Any being, whether it's an imaginal being or anything scented with soul, also has elastic edges, and it will expand. In other words, our sense of it—our sense of what it is and involves and includes, its depths and range—must be elastic, must be extendable, and it will be because of the eros-psyche-logos dynamic.

We've talked extensively about this in recent retreats, how that dynamic gets going and the elements start enriching and fertilizing each other, complicating and pushing each other. The very sense of what a thing is, what it comprises, what is included, the depths and dimensions of the thing will change, extend, expand. Sometimes it shatters first—our original idea and conception and sense of this thing just explodes—and then it grows. Other times it's more elastic and elastically extendable without being so catastrophically dramatic as a shattering of the vessels.

Related to this element but actually a little different, we come to number fifteen, which I'll call infinite echoing and mirroring. There's something in the perception of the imaginal, something when we sense something with soul—though this is much more apparent with intrapsychic images. I think it's still there, much more subtly and obscurely, when we sense something with soul in what we call direct cosmopoiesis—that's not a cosmopoiesis arrived at through a previous intrapsychic image then opening out and spilling over into the environment. This element of infinite echoing and mirroring is present also in sensing with soul objects that are in the world, but it's much more apparent with intrapsychic images.

What I mean by this infinite echoing and mirroring is that imaginal perception involves or includes some sense of infinite mirroring and echoing, mainly between this image and one's life. There's some kind of mysterious and infinite-seeming quality. We get the sense of this infinite echoing, like mirrors placed opposite each other where the reflections go toward infinity. Or again, like an echo in a canyon that doesn't seem to clearly stop at some point. We can't discern exactly when that series of echoes ends; the edges, the further or deeper edges, are indistinct. They fade into infinity. We sense that this echoing or mirroring is or might be going on forever. We can't quite make out the edge.

This sense of it is not often primary in our attention—it's usually secondary. But it's actually very

important, this kind of infinite depth of mirroring and mutual mirroring and echoing, usually between this image and one's life. It's related to meaningfulness, which will be the next element of our list. This image somehow reflects my life or aspects and dimensions of my life, some of which may be quite clear and some of which are a little indistinct and not so obvious. And there's a sense there's more of that reflecting than I can even quite delineate. The image is reflecting my life. My life is reflecting the image. They mutually reflect each other.

As I said, this is an important element, an important aspect to become aware of. It's intrinsic to imaginal perception.

I was working with someone a few months ago—I can't remember the exact context now—and she described an image she had had of a kind of Balinese or Indonesian figure, quite a common stance for an Oriental statue. You'll have seen this somewhere: a figure that's a little fierce with a sword raised above the head and held like a dagger pointing outward. Often one foot is raised and the other foot is bent at the knee.

So there's this kind of very elegant, very dynamic, fierce warrior pose. The image that this person had was of this—whatever it is, excuse me if I'm getting the cultural reference wrong—Balinese or Indonesian warrior god. She could tell it was important, but it wasn't quite becoming fully imaginal. She could sense there was a sacredness to it, but the sacredness was not familiar to her. Now you could say, well, it's from a culture she's not familiar with—she doesn't know that iconography. But also her poise in relation to the sacredness of this image, that too felt unfamiliar. She didn't recognize her own stance either. The whole sense and feeling of sacredness wasn't quite accessible to her, and the entire image really had not become fully imaginal. In her words, it was a bit two-dimensional.

So we were talking, and I suggested that perhaps she could notice and tune into and linger with—probably there are many ways, but really any noticeable way—how she recognized this archetypal image echoing her life personally. The personal echoes, the echoing between image and personal life, the mirroring and being mirrored by this image, this archetype, this icon, whatever it is.

One has to be careful not to be too clunky here. It's a very delicate thing, usually, and I'll talk more about this. It's like—and I have talked about it before—not landing too heavily on "it means this." A lot of this work is really quite subtle. We're picking up resonances that are quite subtle, certainly in their deeper ranges as they become more indistinct and carry that sense of infinity. They're really quite subtle, almost by definition. So you can't be too heavy-handed in this approach of feeling into that infinite echoing and mirroring.

Some of the resonances may be distinct—not entirely clear, but you really get a sense of, "Oh yeah, I can kind of see a sort of refracted or inflected version of that stance of that god in my life, or in a certain thread through my life, or in a certain current of dealings or events and my relationship with them." The instances of this mirroring may be very specific psychological aspects of oneself—very specific personal

psychological aspects or patterns. Or they might be events in one's life, or tendencies to approach or be in certain situations a certain way. Or the potential that we don't often manifest or realize—to be in certain ways, in certain relationships or situations.

In other words, there might be something we're capable of, and the image, the imaginal figure, is partly catalyzing something or opening the door of a possibility. It's showing us: "Hey, you know, you actually have this in you as well—this stance, this possibility, this way of relating."

All this connects with the sixteenth element I want to highlight, which is meaningfulness. Again, you can see some overlap here. But this recognition of specific and finite representation or mirroring—when I recognize that, it brings the image alive. It's part of this sixteenth aspect: the sense of meaningfulness. When I notice this specificity—oh, that's echoing, I see that echoes this—and maybe I get the sense of the larger infinite echoing as it shades off into less distinct echoes and mirrorings, then that ignites the constellation, the imaginal constellation. That ignites the other nodes.

So again, there's a middle way to tread here. If I conceptually reduce and limit an imaginal figure to "this image means x only" or "y only"—if I limit it to just this meaning, this one singular meaning, or even a couple of meanings, or five meanings, whatever it is—it will sooner or later, and often sooner, kill the imaginal. It will kill the image as an imaginal image, as a potent, fertile, endlessly deep imaginal image, and also kill the soul-making. It will squash it, constrict it, take the fire away from it.

I'm mentioning this because I want to be clear. Based on feedback, I wonder whether I've been clear enough on this, or perhaps overemphasized something. I was working recently with someone who had an image of riding on a flying dragon—straddling this dragon on its back, flying—and there was a lovely relationship between the person and the dragon. But they had completely no sense of it meaning anything, and the whole thing didn't really open up. The richness and fullness of the imaginal wasn't there. It was just an interesting image, but it wasn't really rich and deep and juicy and multi-dimensional and colored.

Because I knew this person and their practice quite well, I could see very clearly some of the echoing, some of the elements that were mirrored between their life and this image. Even when they were describing how they were wanting to squeeze the dragon with their legs—like you would with a horse, using your inner thighs to signal and be in relationship with the horse you're riding, in relationship with the dragon. There was that kind of relationship going on, but he was just baffled. It meant nothing to him.

Knowing him, for me it was really clear. This kind of echoing was going on between that image and very much to do with practice—effort in practice, relationship with effort, modulating effort, the sense of practice having enormous potential power and really being able to fly, to take off, with all the beauty and soul-beauty of the dragon. Even elements of practice like samadhi. Yet he was stumbling a lot, often running into difficulties around effort. For me, knowing him, it was puzzling sitting there: why doesn't he see that? Why is this not taking off? Why doesn't he see that echoing and that meaning?

He actually told me that he'd thought he wasn't supposed to look for any meaning in images. So it's possible that I just wasn't clear in the past in making this distinction between meaningfulness and meaning. I may have overemphasized not reducing it to a certain meaning.

So I would rather say now that meaningfulness includes individual meanings. In this infinite echoing mirror—related to the last point, the last element—we can discern individual echoes or individual reflections between life and image, but we're not stopping at that.

So often we revert to an attitude or relationship with images and imaginal figures, including dream images and figures, an attitude or relationship that wants to figure out what it means and sum it up. It's not, I want to hopefully make clear, that we need to shut down that meaning-seeking attitude, but we need to make sure it doesn't dominate. It doesn't take over and limit.

Another way of thinking about this is that an imaginal figure or something sensed with soul, as I said before, has personhood. We sense more and more of its personhood. This imaginal figure is a person. This thing or object sensed with soul is a person. And it would seem ridiculous in our lives to ask about a person that we love and are touched by or who's important in our lives and psyche, "What does he or she mean to me?" I mean, I might be able to say a couple of things about someone who's deeply important to me in my life, some person, but I can't say that exhausts them or it's only that they mean X or Y to me.

An imaginal figure or a dream figure even is just the same. It doesn't, I would say, only mean X or Y any more than a person who is deeply important to me and in my life, whom I love and who loves me, only means X or Y to me. There's personhood there, and personhood is unfathomable.

So meaning, individual meaning - yes, there is this meaning, there is this echo, there is this whatever it is - may be part of it, may be part of what the imaginal figure is or does. But we can never reduce either an imaginal figure or a person in our lives to one meaning or even several meanings.

So the meaning-seeking and meaning-finding attitude is part of imaginal practice. I didn't mean to exclude it completely or banish it from imaginal practice, but rather don't stop there, don't limit it to that. When it's there, notice it and take whatever meaning, whatever individual meanings, that attitude or faculty comes up with. Oh, it means this, or I notice this echo, or I make this conclusion. Take it as just one "true" meaning of potentially infinite meanings that are carried by and in a certain image, a certain soul perception.

In this way, we do include that. It is important because it might - in this case, with the image of the dragon or the figure of the warrior god - be part of what stimulates, as a node in the lattice, the filling out of the imaginal. So yes, meanings are fine, just don't limit it. Keep open the gates to the garden of infinite interpretations. Keep them open. Don't just settle for one tree or one apple in that orchard.

So we're including individual specific meanings. When I use the word meaningfulness, it's really fullness, meaningfulness, which means there's an unlimited possible number of meanings, and there's this infinite

mirroring and echoing of image and life.

So there's a middle way here. On one extreme, a mistake would be any kind of monovalent reduction to one meaning only - "This image means this." Or even several meanings. That would be one extreme of mistake. Another extreme would be a refusal to see any personal and specific meanings in the image at all. That would be another extreme, another mistake. And as I said, if we do that, then probably the image will be without meaningfulness. It won't come alive, it won't open its full sacredness to us, it won't have its full beauty potential or the aliveness of the dynamic of its beautifying, its depth, as it could.

Meaningfulness includes meaning, meanings, and sometimes it's not actually clear. We don't have a clear sense of what any meaning is. And that's fine. "I'm puzzled by this image. I don't know." But at least let's not shut down the possibility of individual meanings, individual discernible echoes and reflections between life and image.

You can probably hear again that this talk of meaning and meaningfulness is related to duty. It's also related to values. And again, I'm hoping at some point to talk more about values and ethics and the relationship with soul-making. But meaningfulness is related to values. We find a sense of meaningfulness in life in relationship to, or part of our sense of meaningfulness is, our relationship to what we value, and what we value most highly, and what's most important to us in our life. This will give our life meaningfulness to the height of that value.

The thing about values is they're limitless. They always will have a beyond to them.

If we say love or goodness or beauty—and these are things that, for some people, and I put myself in that category, they mean everything. Soul-making, soulfulness—these are open-ended values that mean more even than life, more even than life and death. But they don't have a limit to them. They're transcendent in that respect.

They're also transcendent in the sense that any manifestation will be actually limited in how much it instantiates or manifests any particular value. A piece of art will always have some kind of limit to its beauty, if you like, or some kind of compromise that it's making. With goodness, when we're actually faced with ethical choices, we're often making a kind of compromise—well, if I take care of this, then that goes a little bit, or if I'm taking care of this, I can't take care of that.

So there's a sense that values need to manifest in life, and we need to make choices, and oftentimes choices are hard because we can't have perfect, complete and comprehensive goodness. We can't have perfect, complete and comprehensive love actualized in life. The *brahmavihāra* in the heart in meditation is one thing. Actualized in life, we make choices.

There's something about values that they're always kind of beyond what we can reach. Not only can they always be more—you can always be somehow more good or more beautiful or more soulful—but they're also... how we actually manifest them and encounter their manifestations is always going to have some

kind of limit or compromise to it.

This in itself is something very interesting. I may return to that in later talks or a later series. But it means that in relation to values, they've got a kind of infinity to them. They've got an infinitude, a transcendence, a beyondness always. And that is part of why we can have an erotic relationship with values and ideas like goodness and beauty and harmony and soulfulness. Because of the infinity, they're always going to have a beyondness, and it always allows Eros to constellate in relation to them.

Values have a part to do with meaningfulness, and values also have a part to do with images and sensing the soul. Whenever we have an imaginal perception, and whenever we're sensing something or other with soul, values that are really important to us, that are dear to our souls and hearts, are bound up—if you like—or expressed or refracted or hinted at, or shining through that imaginal thing, in that imaginal constellation. I hope to come back to this at some point. That's part of meaningfulness—it's our sense of value.

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