Aspects of the Imaginal (Part 6)

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 1:30:39

Let's take just a moment to remind ourselves of the point of what we're doing right now—to frame where we are and the trajectory of what we're trying to accomplish in this set of talks.

We were identifying a group or list of elements or aspects of the imaginal to make more clear what we really mean by that word "imaginal," which different people use. This supports the understanding and grasping of the conceptual framework that we're using, and also deepens, enriches, and refines the sensitivity and discernment in practice when one begins to notice these things, pay attention to them, and tune to them—these aspects and elements of the imaginal constellation experience.

In addition to that, we are pointing out the possibility of noticing and tuning to some of these aspects in different ways in order to support the movement or development, the evolution of some perception into the more authentically imaginal realm. There is a spectrum of the uses of imagination, and at one end is what we're calling imaginal.

These elements can be played with, attended to in a way that amplifies them, ignites that specific node or element aspect that one's paying attention to. That in turn can ignite or spread that illumination, that activation—that soul life can spread through the other nodes of the lattice, the other stars of the constellation.

The general point about this kind of amplification or ignition is that we can notice one of these elements or aspects. Here I am working with an image; here I am with a certain perception and I notice one of these elements. I bring my attention to that and I sensitively tune into that particular quality, or I bring a delicate question to bear in relation to that node.

For example: Is this imaginal figure autonomous? Do they seem independent? Just the introduction of the question lightly shapes my attention in a way that shines a light on that particular element. The light may illuminate, ignite, amplify that element, draw it out to consciousness, bring it to life really. From there, the whole thing may become more imaginal.

Or the question: Do I have a sense that they're—would I call them real or not real? Sometimes the questions can be posed in actual language in time like that. Sometimes that's way too clunky. It's more a kind of question that's very subtly implicit in the very attention itself, in the looking—very, very nuanced and delicate.

Another question, another way of bringing a kind of very sensitive, curious attention—again, say with the example of an imaginal figure or imaginal perception that we're wanting to help move, evolve along the

spectrum towards fully imaginal, fully sensing the soul—might be: Am I loved? Am I loved by this other that I am perceiving? Or, what kind of love do they have for me? What's the quality or character of that love that may be there that I might sense?

So again, this possibility of just noticing, or a kind of questioning, or a kind of curious, sensitive attention to one of those elements or aspects.

Thirdly, there's the possibility that one can actually shift one of those elements, move it, turn it on, switch it on, wiggle it or jiggle it or change it a little bit so that it turns on. In being turned on, it turns on the other elements and the whole constellation, the whole lattice is turned on, amplified, to resonate in that imaginal wavelength of things.

So there are those three possibilities: just noticing; a kind of questioning or sensitive, curious attention; and the possibility of actually focusing on shifting it, switching it on, turning it on, wiggling, jiggling it until it comes on. Very, very delicate, all this. Very delicate, very light, not so clunky.

I've said before, and I'll say it again right now: A lot of the evolution, I think, when we talk about practice going deeper or evolving or maturing, has to do with things becoming more subtle, actually. Not so much more fireworks, more clunkiness, more grossness. A lot has to do with the experiences becoming more subtle and correspondingly our awareness and our responsiveness becoming much more delicate and nuanced and subtle.

Sometimes there's a third or fourth possibility. We can actually start deliberately with one of these elements that may be accessible for us at that time. For example, we might just have accessible to us a general sort of humility in relationship with what might even be a very vague sense of divinity. It's just the sense of my humility in the face of the divine, or whatever words one wants to use. In that humility, despite the vagueness there, again it functions—that node is being illuminated, amplified, brought out more, brought to life more, and that can spread. The vagueness may remain. We talked about a sense of divinity as one of the other nodes. Well, that may remain vague, or it may get more clear or more particular.

Or another one that might one deliberately start with is actually loving. Here's this perception of another. What if I actually express love? We said that love was one of these nodes—loving and being loved. What if I actually just now, deliberately, feel the germ, the seed, the basis of that love? It's just a little bit.

What if I amplify it? What if I express it? What if I tune into it, switch it on? Then what happens?

Or it might be, as another example, for those who have a deep understanding of emptiness—one that's really accessible in perception. One can have that understanding in the moment, in the actual perception of things, of the middle way of emptiness: neither real nor not real, and the magic of that. If you do know that kind of level I'm talking about, the way that opens up all kinds of possibilities as well as the sacredness of things—then that middle way of emptiness, for some people, becomes quite fertile ground to

open up the middle way of the imaginal that we'll come back to shortly. That can open up the whole realm, the whole tenor, field, texture and wavelength of the imaginal.

Or it might be that what's accessible right from the beginning in a deliberate way is that fullness of intention—that element I drew attention to earlier in our list. I can be here, intending in practice, in a stance of relating to this other or this imaginal perception, not primarily for my sake, but for something bigger: for the sake of soul-making, for the sake of the divine, for the sake of Buddha nature, whatever makes sense. That fullness of intention is also going to have an alchemical, catalyzing capacity.

Or it may be—and I think I've suggested this and we've done a little bit on some retreats—one can start with a deliberate image of one's energy body or deliberate image of one's body. For example, just imagining the body as a body of light, maybe a particular color, blue or anything. Just staying with that imagination and then tuning in—it's a deliberate imagination, but then feeling what that feels like, what the body feels like, with sensitivity tuning to that particular wavelength of that image and that sense of the energy body. See what opens up from this image of the energy body and the sense of it. It may be that other images open up, or that itself becomes a genuine imaginal image, or something starts to interact with that, or it relates to its environment in a way that's genuinely imaginal or sensed with soul.

I think on one retreat we did a guided meditation with the Om Mani Padme Hum mantra, imagining the syllables as jewels and the body as made somehow, in some mystical way, of these cosmic, magical jewels of compassion—the syllables of the Om Mani Padme Hum mantra, or just jewels, magical, mystical jewels. What is it to have a body of jewels?

Or it might be something at the other end of the spectrum in terms of earthiness and solidity. What is it to imagine the body as a body made of, or at one with, or mixed with, or emerging from the roots of trees underground in the dark, damp, fragrant soil, the moist earth? Actually imagining that, and then again tuning into that and seeing what comes from that.

So there are different possibilities in terms of how we use these nodes, how we relate to the nodes in supporting and encouraging that movement into the fully imaginal and fully sensing with soul.

We were going through our list and got to number sixteen: meaningfulness. We made the point that specific meanings, specific echoings of the image with life and life with the image, and the sense of particular duties or particular values—these elements are all sub-elements or parts of the aspect of meaningfulness. But meaningfulness is something larger than any specific meaning or even a limited, finite collection of meanings or echoes. It cannot be reduced to values. Meaningfulness is something larger, somewhat akin in its largeness and openness to that infinite echoing and mirroring. It's bigger than individual echoes or ways that life and image reflect each other.

So meaningfulness is more like—we say this image or this perception I have is pregnant with meaningfulness. There's something discernible and something half-hidden, just like when you see a

pregnant woman or animal. The pregnancy is visible, palpable, but what is being gestated is not yet visible. Sometimes things emerge from the imaginal, from sensing with soul, from a hiddenness into manifestation, but we never exhaust that meaningfulness. The pregnancy is never fully over. The imaginal is always pregnant. The soul is always pregnant and always giving birth, or at least very often giving birth again and again.

So there's something tangible and something obscure. There are intimations of meaning—all that is intended by the word meaningfulness. But the obscurity or the not quite knowing what's there, half-hidden, does not make meaningfulness any less powerful. The fact that we're not entirely clear what it is that so moves us, that has this meaningfulness for us and gives us a sense of devotion and orientation and functions like a beacon, touches our heart, touches our soul—the fact that we're not exactly clear what it is, can't neatly define it, wrap it up, sum it up, does not take away any of the power of that meaning.

Number seventeen on our list is something I'd call eternality or timelessness—some sense of the timelessness or eternality of an image, or at least some kind of alteration of the time sense. Some sense of the timelessness or eternality of an image is an aspect of what makes it imaginal in our language, in our conception. I've talked about this before in a few places, and for me it's a really important element. There's a difference between...

or rather imaginal images have what I was calling an iconic nature versus a narrative nature. They don't go somewhere in time towards some grand resolution like a story, some heroic finale and redemption necessarily. The power and the redemption of the imaginal is not in its narrative nature. Apotheosis is not in its narrative kind of culmination or end point. So this to me is quite important. I call it iconic rather than narrative. Images tend to be iconic rather than narrative.

So for example, nowadays a lot of people are very importantly drawing attention to the need to, as hopefully humanity needs, make a transition or an evolution, really, a development of wisdom and practical wisdom into, let's say, 100% renewable energy. So important—coming away from fossil fuels and polluting fuels. And so the imagination, the faculty of the skillful imagination that human beings have, is a very important faculty. Can we imagine that future when everyone's homes are powered and energy comes and transport comes from 100% renewable energy, electric cars and whatnot? Can we imagine that, and imagine the stages that might move us towards that, that might transition us towards that state, where there's no depletion of resources, minerals, etc., from the planet, species—can we imagine that? The skillful use of the imagination, that's more of a narrative image. It's not yet imaginal.

Imaginal has more of this timeless, eternal quality. It's not moving in time necessarily towards some goal. Or if it is, because some images do have a kind of relatively narrative quality, it's what I tend to call, use the word fantasy, but they have this aspect of—it's always already happening, this story. All the elements of the story, all the stages of this fantasy, of this narrative image, are actually somehow still happening,

always happening in hierophantic time, in holy time, in sacred time. And somehow, curiously, the beginning is happening at the same time as the end of the story, even if they're, on the face of it, separated in time. So that there's still this timeless or eternal sense, however we use words to describe that, in an imaginal image that is of a relatively narrative nature.

So what this means in practice, regarding this element, is that we can pay attention, when we're working with an image, to the sense of temporality—the sense of temporality within and of that image, or that imaginal perception, or the way we're sensing something with soul. So we pay attention to the sense of temporality and notice it.

Now this is often quite subtle, and it's as if the two levels go on at once—the movement in time, of course, and the eternal aspect. But can we start tuning to the sense of temporality, attending and noticing the sense of temporality and noticing and tuning to the sense of timelessness within the larger sense of temporality? The sense of eternality somehow pervading this image? And that, again, just as with the other elements, that noticing can amplify that very sense of eternality, which brings the whole thing, raises up, if you like—or if you don't like that vertical innuendo, amplifies or illuminates or brings alive that element of the imaginal. And then that element, again, spreads and the whole thing becomes imaginal.

So there are many possibilities and flavors of time and also of timelessness when we sense with soul in the imaginal. It's not just one kind of experience we're talking about. There are many possibilities.

So, for example, one may be dwelling with a whole body, energy body awareness, and the sense of eternality of, if you like, of oneself as image, and of one's life as image, but in a certain way. Meaning, in this case, just as an example, the sense of one's whole life with its narrative and its difficulties and its dukkha and its challenges and its tragedies and all of that, its story and the conditions of body, of soul, of story and conditions of relationship with others and world—all of that sensed or seen, so to speak, from, if you like, after death, from out of time, from the perspective of eternity.

So what is it to get a sense of oneself and one's whole life, that whole stretch from birth to death, maybe even more, seen, if you like, from after death, from out of time? And that's one possibility. I'm just giving a possibility of a kind of eternality or timelessness. And one can sometimes actually find one's way into that perspective with the energy body. And if there's that energy body awareness and that eternal energy, it can open up the door to the imaginal—the doors, the gates to the imaginal, the gates to the *mundus imaginalis*.

The imaginal world can open up just from seeing oneself. One's self becomes image, one's life becomes icon and becomes seen with soul, sensed with soul. And this will bring with it the other elements—the humility that we talked about, the fullness of intention that we talked about. It will ignite, illuminate, amplify, bring those into existence. And likewise, those elements, for example, humility and the fullness of intention, will likewise help that sense of, in this case, timelessness—this perspective of eternity—will help

to ignite, illuminate, amplify, bring that into existence.

And then one is sensing, sensing oneself, sensing one's life and one's death, and that whole journey with soul, as well as this moment now, as well and including the dukkha—all the dukkha, the whole life with the dukkha. And that itself is extraordinarily beautiful and extraordinarily redeeming, healing, transforming, prayerful, mystical perception—sensing all that with soul. And then at that point, there may be other possibilities that open up from that.

One can relax that sort of whole life from the perspective of eternity, especially an eternal artist. One can relax that whole perspective and emphasis a little bit, and then there are other aspects or another relationship with time that can be sensed with soul—other relationships with timelessness.

For example, the unknown of the future and the moment can come and be sensed with soul. That very unknowing—we do not know our fate, we do not know the future. But when it's arrived at that way, opened up that way, with that kind of fullness and richness and dimensionality, that's quite different from just a kind of more flat acknowledgment or recognition of a very basic insight that we don't know the future. Quite different, quite a different level of sensing and perception there.

Now, someone—maybe someone hearing this who hadn't listened to all the other material—might say, "What are you saying? Are you saying this is something that's not impermanent?" And for a Buddhist, obviously, that would be a kind of horrific heresy or just ridiculous or whatever. So I probably don't need to say this to you at this point, but of course images are impermanent. Of course everything is impermanent. Impermanence is obvious.

By introducing this aspect or element of eternality, of timelessness, we're not dismissing the perspective that things are impermanent—that images, this very image that one is perhaps so moved by and senses as eternal, this very image is impermanent, comes and goes. So we're somehow holding both at once again. Yes, of course, it's obvious it's impermanent. And there's this timeless kind of strata or dimension or aspect to it.

Sometimes, again, people with a lot of deep emptiness practice—if that's something you've developed or just know is a possibility—can come to the point where one thoroughly and absolutely knows the emptiness of time, alongside everything else. And that knowing of the emptiness of time kind of opens up and legitimizes many possibilities in practice.

So we're holding the impermanence and the—not so much permanence as timelessness, but you could say permanence—always already happening. We're holding them together. As William Blake said, help us or save us from single vision. Save us from single vision. It's not just this or just that. It's not just eternal. It's not just impermanent. There is this capacity in the imaginal to see with more than one way of looking at once.

Nothing here is being presented or practiced because one can't face the truth of impermanence and the

fact of death. There's completely nothing to do with that. All this practice is grounded in—yes, death comes, and we don't know when, usually. Everything dies. Everyone dies. I will die. You will die. Everything is impermanent. And we do need to face up to that in life. We need to open the heart and the being to that. This is just not coming out of an inability or a refusal to face that.

Nor is it a kind of clinging to this sense of timelessness at the expense of an acknowledgment of impermanence. I hardly need to say this. We're not talking about images of "happy ever after"—that this is what will happen—or an image that kind of ends all rosy. Something completely different. In what I just described about sensing the whole of one's existence with soul, there is still death, there is still suffering, and sometimes quite difficult suffering that a life is afflicted by or given to handle. It's not transmuting that into some other kind of ending.

Number eighteen is what I've been calling the imaginal middle way, or the middle way of the imaginal, or the theatre quality, the theatre aspect of the imaginal. This involves non-reification. It's not taken as real and literal and purely concretized. The relationship with the real self in a real world is much more less solid, less fixated.

Someone might have an image or a vision of teaching or of serving or whatever it is. Traditional or maybe more usual kinds of dharma or spiritual approaches to that kind of thing—someone having those kinds of images or visions of themselves teaching or serving—

whatever it is, would be: let go of the attachment to whether that vision materializes and whether you get what you want, whether it comes to pass. So there's the teaching of, yes, you had that image, but just let go of any attachment to whether it materializes.

Or it might be, again, in the more usual or common approach: Can you be aware and discern with that vision or that image of serving or whatever it is? Because it may be, if you like, true or accurate or kind of prophetic intuition of something of the future or something that you're called to. Or it may be your delusion, your wishful thinking.

But in either of those two more common or usual spiritual approaches, they both rest on a kind of realist appropriation of the image or the vision. And they refer it simply, directly, literally and concretely to a real self in a real world of real time. So all these other elements that we're talking about—the timelessness—that's not there. And it's all about a real possibility in a real self in a real world.

And in neither case—whether it's "let go of the attachment to whether it materializes" or "discern whether this is an intuitive glimpse of the future or just delusion"—in neither case is the image treated imaginatively. Neither case relates to it as or allows it to be an imaginal image in our sense of the word. Instead, it has to be categorized as either real or not real, either real or delusion.

And the middle way, the imaginal, is not content with either "real or not real," either "real or delusion," "real or papañca." This is what I mean by the middle way. Neither "real" nor "not real" seem adequate or

accurate or truly appropriate categories or labels for this imaginal perception or this what I'm perceiving when I sense with soul.

Another word I use here is theatre—the theatre element of it. When we say theatre, that doesn't necessarily mean dramatic. Remember I was giving examples of images that are really not dramatic at all, or even particularly narrative. They're just a sort of freeze frame of something. So the word theatre doesn't imply grand drama or narrative. But it implies this quality or status: this figure, this perception has power for the soul, has a certain depth, a certain ability to affect and move me or us. It's important to me and it even feels necessary, and soul-making comes with it, and there's this infinite echoing. All that we talk about as poetic truth or artistic truth—that's another way of saying this. We're talking about something that's true, but it's a poetic truth. It's not a literal truth or necessarily a concrete truth.

I don't know if you've ever been, as I have, to a play in a theatre, and the theatre is very small, and one's sitting very near the actors, and the actors may be very good, and it's a very intimate, vulnerable experience to be in good theatre with powerful actors in that way. It's very intimate. You are involved. You cannot not be involved unless you really go into some kind of shutdown mode. It's actually vulnerable for you as a member of the audience. You're right there, open, your being is open, the actors can see you.

All this relates to imaginal figures as well. When we sense things with soul—which I'm using interchangeably—you can't be untouched in that situation, unimplicated. It's not the cold distance of the ideal scientific method that's uninvolved.

When we are practicing and something's imaginal, we can notice: Oh, it has this theatre-like quality in terms of it's not real because it's theatre, but it's not not-real either. And I don't just mean by "not not-real" that it was just happening, so therefore something exists. I mean there's something, there's a deeper kind of poetic truth being communicated there.

This aspect—and again it's something we can notice, and I'm pretty sure that in time, anyone doing these imaginal practices and getting into it will just notice that this is an element, this is an aspect of the imaginal—may not be obvious to us at first. It has a quality of theatre, it has an air of theatre to it. It's neither real nor not real. Neither of those labels or categories really applies. It's in the imaginal middle way.

Again, noticing that tenor of it, that status of it, that air or quality to it, amplifies that quality. It becomes more apparent. Over time, it becomes something that one can just notice immediately with practice. And then, again, the whole constellation can amplify, illuminate, evolve toward the more authentically, fully imaginal.

So that word play, which I tend to use a lot in my teaching—whatever I'm teaching, dharma-wise and practice-wise—is necessary or relevant in both of its senses. We go to the theatre and we see a play. So there is something of a play happening, but something that has this artistic, poetic, necessary, vital, deep

truth to it at the same time as it's theatre.

Play in the other sense is necessary as well: the capacity and the permission for us to play in meditation and with perception and in life. Play with concepts, play with experiences, play with ways of looking, play with energies.

Are we able and are we free? Are we granted permission to play? To me, that's absolutely necessary. Actually, it's the way I tend to teach. I think it's maybe not necessary, but really, really helpful for all practice. And in this realm of the imaginal and soul-making, I would say it's vital. Absolutely vital. Necessary.

So play, in both senses, is an ingredient of imaginal practice. It's an ingredient of soul-making that remains fertile and expanding. Because something can be soul-making, then something freezes. We've been through all this on previous retreats when we talk about the soul-making dynamic in eros, psyche, logos. So we could say that the quality of play, the aspect of play in both its senses, is a prerequisite of soul-making and imaginal practice.

Some practitioners have deep desire. There's no doubt about their desire and their aspiration and their dedication to practice and the path. But that element of play is not so easy for them. For different reasons, possibly—maybe the capacity to play is actually inhibited by the very image or the logos, the psyche or logos of what practice looks like. I encounter this occasionally, and it's so important, I think—play in both its senses.

You just have to watch children playing to see how sometimes very serious that play can be, how captivating it is for them. To me, it's something really, really beautiful. And they're not mistaking it for reality. If they're playing soldiers or whatever, they're not mistaking that for a real war. It's like, "I just shot you, bang bang, you're dead," and now you get up. That doesn't make sense—there's no confusion. They're just so with the play and playing in this imaginary way, in the theatre. There's no confusion about categories of reality for the most part. We'll come back to this.

But the play can be very serious, very engrossing, very vitalizing and deeply important. And of course, we talk about playing music. See the play and the beauty and the necessity and the seriousness—well, I know for me as a jazz musician, when I was playing.

Sometimes, what I've also noticed recently is that people—and I don't think I've really touched on this so much, or not really made it transparent—the relationship of this imaginal middle way to the middle way of emptiness, the more traditional middle way that the Buddha referred to in the Kaccāyanagotta Sutta in the Pali Canon and then was really amplified by Nāgārjuna and the whole Mahāyāna teachings. Middle way referring to emptiness between is and is not, exists and doesn't exist, real and not real.

So what's the relationship between that traditional emptiness middle way and the imaginal middle way? They're not quite one and the same. I would say the emptiness middle way is—for me it's extremely

important—but in terms of imaginal practice it's more like understanding the emptiness middle way as part of a much larger conceptual framework of the whole of practice and a certain range and directionality, a range of directions of possibility of dharma. In other words, understanding that deeply—the middle way of emptiness is an integral part of a much larger logos and conceptual framework which we're trying to unfold and explain and also develop. So it has a different place in the scheme of things.

Not entirely, because for some people, the emptiness middle way, when they really get a deep sense of that, actually opens up the possibility of the imaginal as a viable and sensible path—legitimized—and also opens up that sense of sacredness and the possibility of perceiving things imaginally, with the imaginal middle way. So for some people, that understanding of the emptiness middle way is a springboard, either conceptually or in actual practice. The practice has actually arrived at that very deep center of the emptiness middle way, and that's what opens up the imaginal middle way.

Other people—and I wonder whether they're in the majority—don't need that deep sense of the middle way of emptiness in their practice. It's quite a deep level we're talking about, and they don't need that. It's more that they have a poet's sense of things, of poetic truth, of artistic truth. They have the sense, and they can feel it, of the theatre element. So it's just there in the perception, integrated into the way they live and consider things and relate to existence—already this potential of the imaginal middle way.

And as I said earlier, if it's not there initially, it will emerge just as one gets familiar with the mundus imaginalis, with the imaginal realm and the perceptions. One actually notices, "Oh yeah, there's that quality," and that distinguishes this imaginal way from other perceptions.

For me—and I thought quite a lot about this when I was starting to teach this kind of thing, and was unsure whether to include it or not—but more and more I really leaned towards wanting to include it as a necessary part of soul-making, a necessary part of what it means for something to be imaginal and for something to be sensed with soul. I feel it's absolutely crucial, and not just for the philosophical sense and framework that it gives.

Continue beautifying this talk (part 7/11). Maintain the same tone and style as previous parts.

Not just in the service of creating and establishing and opening up and filling out an adequate and robust conceptual framework for everything that we're doing here. I think that's very important too, actually. I think it's very, very important. But it's more crucial in the sense that this really helps the balance—especially when there's a lot of eros, especially when the soul is on fire that way and there's all that beauty and all that attraction to this path and opening, and all kinds of things are opening up.

It really helps this middle way, this sense of the middle way, the theater element. It really helps the navigation, the balance, and, as I say, the fertility. It helps in soul-making. It's an element of any

soul-making. I'm going to come back to this because it's actually not quite that simple, but let's just say that for now. And I would like to just emphasize just how important that is.

That was number nineteen. Number twenty is something we've already said: that the imaginal, or soul-making, or sensing with soul, is, as they say of beauty, in the eye of the beholder. Or we may say in the soul of the beholder, in the senses of the beholder. And that realization, that awareness, that recognition, that concept, helps the imaginal middle way. When I realize, oh, something is not objectively independently imaginal—whatever it is, we've gone through this in this talk earlier, in part one, I think—realizing that, remembering it, recognizing it, and being aware of it, keeping in mind that concept, again very, very lightly, it helps establish us, open us onto the middle way.

In other words, soul-making, sensing the soul, the realm of the imaginal, an imaginal figure or imaginal perception of something is in the eye, in the senses, in the soul of the beholder. Another way of saying that is, again as we said before, the imaginal is really a way of looking. And by way of looking, I mean that includes a way of conceiving, a way of relating. So nothing is, so to speak, objectively or independently imaginal. The imaginal arises as a function of the way of looking.

That twentieth aspect as a concept, as an awareness, as a recognition, helps, for some people, in the establishing of that middle way, the imaginal middle way.

Now, for some people, this talk or this teaching that perception, or actually any perception, whether it's imaginal or material, is dependent on the way of looking—this teaching that anything is dependent on the way of looking is tricky. When one hasn't quite seen it for oneself in practice through deep fading and all that, and the way things manifest dependent on the way of looking and what's wrapped up in the way of looking, and then it comes as a teaching—and I know I emphasize it over and over again—for some people it's a little tricky because the usual way of thinking and understanding can't help but conclude that if something is dependent on the way of looking, whether I sense something with soul, or I have this imaginal figure, or this beautiful perception of sacredness, and if it's dependent on the way of looking, then somehow it actually can't be real then. Because our usual way of conceiving of reality is independent of the way of looking, having objective existence, and it can't be real, therefore it can't really have value, and it can't really be sacred.

So this is troubling. And because I emphasize it so much, it can be a bit of a stumbling block for some people and inclined to sort of do away with that element.

A couple of things about this. I would say that, again, a deeper understanding, a journeying deeper into that whole experimenting and playing with and exploring ways of looking and the whole notion of fabrication and that whole revelatory journey, beautiful revelatory journey—the deeper one goes, at a certain point, one really sees for oneself, one understands in one's bones the emptiness of everything.

That means it's not that objects are dependent on way of looking, meaning that the self somehow or the

mind or the awareness or something here in the subject or the way of looking, this is real and it forms a real basis for what is not so real. We go deeper on this journey into understanding emptiness in practice—it has to be in practice—and we understand that everything is empty. Self is empty. Subject is empty. Awareness is empty. Mind is empty. Ways of looking are empty. They don't inherently exist.

And what that does, because everything is empty, and equally empty, if you like, then all becomes—rather than one thing is valuable and in relation to that or relative to that, this thing is not valuable, this is sacred because it's real and that is not sacred because it's not real and therefore not valuable—everything, because everything is equally, deeply, mysteriously, mystically empty, if one really goes into the roots of what emptiness means, what we can sense of what emptiness means, everything actually becomes sacred. Everything becomes valuable. Everything has this status of the, if you like, traditionally Buddhist middle way of being neither real nor not real.

And there's a magic in that, in how it is and how things are and their appearing but being empty. So it rather opens up the door to more sacredness, more comprehensive sacredness and more possibilities of kinds of sacredness. I've talked and written about this before; I'm not going to go into it right now.

What I want to emphasize right now is the twenty-first element of our list: the sense of participation. I'm highlighting this because it stands in contrast to that immature or incomplete understanding of dependent ways of looking, which reifies either the way of looking itself or the subject—the self, mind, or awareness that does the looking and sensing.

The notion of participation gives me a sense of dependency on the subject, on the way of looking, on the mind or awareness of self, but not without retaining any objective pole—a pole of value in the object, a pole of sacredness or reality in the object. So this sense of participation forms our twenty-first node or element.

As I mentioned in one of the earlier parts of this talk, the idea of participation preserves autonomy within an understanding and sense of non-separateness. Do you understand? When something participates in some way with something else, it maintains its own autonomy while being kind of non-separate. The sense of participation we're discussing—both the concept of it and the felt sense of it—is something sensible. We perceive it. I'm not talking merely about an idea, just an idea. This is a mystical participation.

We might have a sense and concept of participation in a divine archetype. When we're working with an imaginal figure, perceiving this imaginal figure, there's a sense that I'm somehow participating in the divinity that I'm perceiving. I'm participating in an archetype. The archetype actually needs my participation, and yet I also witness that archetype.

I can get a sense and concept of participating in the mundus imaginalis. But again, it takes my participation. My participation is part of it. It supports it, feeds it, nourishes it, transforms it, changes it. I am not separate from this mundus imaginalis, and yet it's not just me. It's not reducible to me or merely a

figment of my imagination in the impoverished sense of that phrase.

I can sense and conceive of participating in the always-already happening in hierophantic time of whatever I'm witnessing—participating in, being part of, partaking of, fabricating of the image. I can sense participating in the eros of the divine or the divine eros. We talked about tracing that movement and evolution of that sense. I traced it particularly in the Eros Unfettered talks.

One really gets a sense, a perception mixed with concept, that my eros is somehow participating in some larger, deeper, more mysterious, more unfathomable, more divine eros. Similarly with the mind—one's own mind, insights, perceptions, conceiving, holding and entertaining of ideas, the arising of ideas. One's mind is somehow participating in divine mind, in Buddha nature, in cosmic Buddha nature.

One can also sense and perceive participating in the intersubjectivity of the imaginal other—the object or thing, the person being sensed with soul. One participates in the intersubjective communication of eros flowing back and forth, love flowing between self and other in soul-making.

As all this deepens—and I would say this is a natural evolution, the trajectory I traced in some of those talks, particularly in Eros Unfettered—it's actually a natural and inevitable evolution of the sense of things and the concept, if we're following this path. At some point, without needing to rush or hurry it, one can get a sense that this perception I'm having right now, this soul-making happening right now, perhaps my whole life, even the life of culture and history, is participation in the larger unfolding mystery of soul-making—in some larger unfolding of divine soul-making.

It's the soul-making happening of Buddha nature, and I and my soul-making, all that involves, all the elements and aspects and dimensions of my being that involves—in that perception, conceiving, openness, in the body, all of it—is participating in some much larger mystery of soul-making that's unfolding. The Buddha nature soul-making. The soul-making of the cosmic Buddha, the soul-making of the divine, the soul-making of God, whatever.

When I get a sense of this—and I find it quite hard to convey—it's a deep and mysterious concept. We're not talking merely about, for example, when the food delivery truck pulls up at Gaia House and several coordinators help the work yogi and kitchen coordinators unload the food delivery and put it away, and you say, "Oh, I participated in unloading the food delivery today at Gaia House." That's typically quite a flat sort of participation.

I'm talking about something that includes that but is somehow more, somehow more mysterious.

As with many of the other facets and dimensions of the imaginal, this one may not be evident at first. It may be one of those qualities that emerges to our attention and consciousness. We notice it more after time, after we've become more accustomed to the imaginal realm and perceptions there. We say, "Oh yes, there's that quality."

The sense of participation can be quite intense, but it can also be really, really subtle. There's great variety in how palpably and obviously it manifests. But I'm speaking here about a deep and mysterious concept, a deep and mysterious sense of mystical participation in something.

Number twenty-two is what I want to call the concertina—the imaginal concertina or the concertina of the imaginal.

We used to employ the phrase "vertical spectrum" or "vertical spectrum of the imaginal," and I think one or two people picked up on it, though I can't remember when. But we want to retract that now. It was an unfortunate choice of words. We want to replace that same concept with the notion of the concertina.

You know what a concertina is? It's like an accordion that opens outward, or like the bellows used to blow air on a fire—something that expands to reveal its contents. Think of those old file cabinets that stretch open to reveal individual files, or can be compacted so you don't see all the files there. There's probably a better word, but this gives you a sense of what I mean.

When there's an imaginal image or a perception of something sensed with soul, it's also sensed to exist within a context of possible other images. This imaginal image—this way I'm seeing my beloved, sensing her, him, them imaginatively, sensing them with soul—an image comes that is sort of them and sort of not them. It's coming through them; it's a theophany. But there's also a sense at that point, sometimes quite dim at the edges of consciousness, of "Oh, this is one image that I'm perceiving within a larger context of other possible images."

Because I could perceive her, sense her with soul, him, them with soul, and another image might come to the fore or replace this one or be there simultaneously or linger in the background. It's as if this concertina reveals other possibilities, other possible perceptions waiting in the wings. Like a theatre where this character, this image, is waiting for its time to come on stage, and other actors are waiting. There's a sense of other possibilities in potentia.

Sometimes some of these others can be clearly sensed or even perceived. They're individually discernible. One might actually perceive two images simultaneously, sometimes along with the regular perception of my beloved other, or this tree, or whatever I'm sensing with soul. Other times, the sense of the concertina is more vague, more implied—again, like a kind of pregnancy. Either the images there are vague, or they're just very dimly perceived, or we simply have a sense that the concertina is open, that there is a concertina, but the individual images are not coming to the fore and often not individually perceived. Perhaps that's more often the case—just a sense of context.

We can notice when that concertina expands, or when it comes online. The context, this range of possible images, or just the sense of a range of possible images, comes alive, comes online, expands. Again, we can notice that concertina and tune to it, and that helps the whole sense become more imaginal. It helps the imaginal constellation become more filled out, more genuinely imaginal.

With that allusion to waiting in the wings, this element of concertina or aspect of context might be regarded as an aspect of the theatre element or the middle way. As we go through this list, you can see how some elements are implicit in others or qualify others, as we've noted before. In a way, this presence of the sense and concept of a concertina or context prevents us from getting too narrow in our perception, from getting too fixated. To quote William Blake, it prevents us from collapsing our relationship and perception and conception into a kind of single vision, because we're aware of the concertina. That awareness does something to the whole tenor, texture, ether—the realm, the air of the perception.

Now for the last one: concept. Concertina or context was twenty-two. Concept is twenty-three. As I mentioned at the start when we rattled through the list, imaginal perception, sensing with soul, is not non-conceptual. It's not a non-conceptual perception.

One of my ongoing concerns is with how freely and lazily the notion of "non-conceptual" gets bandied about in some spiritual and Buddhist circles. I don't equate concept with thinking. Concept is much more subtle. You can have concept, you do have concept, without actual discursive thought or heavy-duty intellectual, complex ideas.

I reserve the word "non-conceptual," the category of non-conceptual, just for moments of the cessation of perception—just for moments when there is no fabrication and all perception is pacified, to borrow Nagarjuna's phrase. There's a fading of all perception, cessation of all perception and feeling. That is a non-conceptual experience in my book, and only that really qualifies. I've written and talked about this extensively elsewhere, so I won't go into it too much right now.

But for me, all and any perception has concept woven into it.

Certainly any dharma perception, or perception that arises in the context of dharma practice, has this conceptual element woven through it. This includes mindfulness. Mindfulness is not non-conceptual. So-called bare attention is not at all non-conceptual. There is always some sense, no matter how faint or subtle, of subject, object and time as the basic tripod of fabrication underlying even very basic perceptions and conceptions.

Wherever there's any perception of any kind of subject, any kind of object, any kind of time sense—or sense of the present moment, even the present itself—there is concept involved. And actually in many dharma practices, in regular mainstream dharma practices and mindfulness, there are all kinds of concepts woven in. In imaginal soul-making practices, in sensing with soul, all kinds of concepts, a great range of concepts are brought in, or involved rather—they're an important part.

We mentioned the conception, some kind of concept no matter how vague, of the divine nature of this other that I'm perceiving, this imaginal figure or this other that I'm sensing with soul. The divine nature and origin is a perception, and also a concept.

The concept that's involved is not reductive, as I said. This image is not simply a representation of my

compassion or something in my history conceived too tightly or narrowly or flatly. So the conception has to avoid being too reductive or narrow in that way.

But things like this eternality or timelessness that we're talking about—that is also a conception, a concept. "Always already happening" is a conception as much as it is a perception. When we have an imaginal figure—could be anything—and they have certain qualities, there's the conception, among many others, of their nobility and their courage and their dedication and devotion. These are all conceptions as much as they're perceptions.

The whole conception and sense of an imaginal figure's autonomy and personhood, their subjectivity, their soul—or them as souls—is also a concept as much as a sense. Love, as another element, is a concept, of course. It's also not only a concept—it's a lot more than that, as are all these elements. They're not just concepts, but there is a conceptual element as part of any and all of this.

What we were referring to earlier about the participation of my mind in the divine mind, the participation of either the thinking, the conceiving, or the perceiving, or both—the participation of your mind in the divine mind—that's again a concept as much as it's a sense, an imaginal sense.

Something akin to this actually has a long tradition in Western spirituality. I don't know if it started with Aristotle and his idea of the act of intelligence—it might have been before that—and then it was modified and went through a kind of evolution. Lots of spiritual traditions, Kabbalah and others, draw on that and transform it and use it as quite a central mystical principle in their conceptual frameworks.

But we also get a sense of this kind of thing, the participation of mind in each other's minds or in the divine mind, in our life. We get glimpses of it, tastes of it at different times. For example, when there's a kind of creative artistic flow—and even if that's not necessarily something that happens instantaneously, like those Zen drawings that you do very quickly, or a haiku that just comes really quick, or some phrase that comes when you're improvising music and there's a sense in the moment of "wow, something just came through"—but also in the longer stretches of struggle with a big creative project over a long time.

Something might take two or three years to complete—writing a novel, writing a symphony, writing a book, whatever it is—and you can still get a sense of this creativity that's happening. It's me and it's not me. I'm participating in something. My struggle with this, my creativity, my application of mind in and through the creativity is a participation of my mind in something larger—call it divine, whatever you want to call it.

But also between each other. Sometimes people sharing humor—that moment when you and someone else or a group of people grasp something together intuitively, and the spark, the flash of communication that happens there, the brilliant intuition that happens, the connection that happens in finding something humorous or seeing something together. And sometimes it would be very hard to actually articulate what it is. Something happens in the communication of that between human beings.

But also with poetry and with language and with love and communicating love, sometimes non-verbally—there's some way we participate in some greater mind together. And that's how we can have these intuitive flashes. We're participating together in something, we get it together in a brilliant moment of revelation that defies any kind of mechanistic translation from one place to the other through flatly conceived materialistic means.

So this kind of concept and sense is something that we can get a sense of in our life as well. But as I said earlier, when we're talking about participation as an idea, as a concept, as a notion, participation in the divine is a concept, but it's very hard to articulate, very hard to define clearly. And perhaps that's partly what I meant when I said it was a mysterious and deep concept—perhaps it defies such completely clear articulation.

We could give another analogy for participation, something like the arm or the hand of a clock. Big Ben's big hand is part of the clock and participates in the clock's functioning.

The clock needs that to be a fully functioning clock, yet the hand is not the clock itself. It participates, but this mechanistic analogy is far too gross for the deeper, more mysterious participation we can sense when practicing with the imaginal and soul-making.

This brings us to notice that many concepts within our soul-making logos are deliberately vague or, if you prefer, open. When we speak of meaningfulness, the suffix itself leaves possibilities open—infinite, inexhaustible potential that cannot be fully discerned. Love functions similarly, as does the very concept of soul. These are intentionally vague and open concepts.

Soul-making itself embodies this paradox—it is simultaneously vague and precisely defined. On one hand, it encompasses countless nuances, subtleties, qualifications, specificities, and particularities. There are things to notice, include, exclude—endless refinements. Yet simultaneously, it remains a somewhat vague and open notion.

This relates to our earlier discussion of soft and elastic edges—not only for imaginal figures, but for concepts themselves. The concepts that serve soul-making best are those whose edges become soft, elastic, stretchable, even if they didn't begin that way.

We find this fascinating tension: conceptual vagueness and openness alongside the birthing of increasingly subtle delineations and discernments. There's this and there's this, then this and this—each slightly different from the other. The entire soul-making dynamic, through the way eros-psyche-logos fertilize, inseminate, complicate, expand, enrich, deepen, and widen each other, creates and discovers ever more discernments, differentiations, and delineations.

So we have this remarkable straddling: vagueness and openness on one side, increasing subtlety and precision on the other—both in conceptual terms within the logos and logoi, and in our sensitivity as beings, in what we can actually sense. There's an ongoing creation and discovery of new dimensions,

sides, and elements.

We need a conceptual framework that serves what we're doing—soul-making. Therefore, both our larger conceptual structure and individual concepts must serve this purpose. They need to be simultaneously open and loose, yet capable of very refined, subtle discernment. The conceiving that's wrapped up in perceiving requires this straddling, this bridging, this inclusion of both aspects.

It's precisely in this manner of relating to and holding concepts that soul-making is supported. If we were pursuing classical scientific method or certain social sciences, we'd want sharper, measurable, strictly definable concepts—either zero or one, like computers operate.

But when we're interested in soul-making, our relationship with conceptuality is not non-conceptual. We're deeply engaged with conceiving, with logos, with the concepts we entertain. We develop flexibility, richness, and sophistication with them. This becomes something beautiful to us—not the absence of concepts, but their masterful engagement.

The logos aspect of soul-making comes vibrantly alive as an equally important, necessary, and valid part—a vitalizing element of the entire soul-making movement. We won't be non-conceptual, but our way of handling concepts, the kinds we choose, and how they straddle vagueness and refinement—this entire approach becomes integral to our practice.

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