Elements of the Imaginal (1 - 2)

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One of the things we'd like to do on this retreat is trace or unwind a certain thread—outlining, touching, or pointing to what we might call aspects of the imaginal.

There is imagination, and there is what we're calling the imaginal. We want to highlight and point out: What are the aspects of the imaginal? What is the imaginal? What does it involve? Over the days, this will form probably the main thread of the teaching of this retreat. I'll explain why we're even doing this a little later.

For those of you who've been quite into this work and listening to the recordings from the last few years, a lot of this may be quite familiar. Some of the vocabulary might have changed. Other aspects might be less familiar, or you may not have quite noticed them in your practice. Some will be familiar, but it's a slightly different angle—as I said this morning, a slightly different way of opening things up.

We have this word imagination in English. All human beings know that when we get into what Buddhists call papañca, it usually involves imagination. I'm caught up in some kind of fantasy in the fixated sense, in the small sense. I'm contracted around it. I'm dragged wherever it's taking me. That is a use of the imagination that we can say is not very helpful, not very skillful, and certainly not what we're going to call imaginal. But that exists in the spectrum of what is possible for the human imagination.

Then we can get into the realm of mindful imagination. For example, in the Satipatthana Sutta, in the Buddha's discourse on mindfulness, there's a whole long section on death contemplation in the section on mindfulness of the body. Some of that uses the imagination. Imagine your body decomposed. If you can't actually get to your local charnel ground, actually imagine it—imagine rotting corpses, your body become a corpse in various stages of decomposition, being eaten by vultures and so on. So it's actually a mindful use of the imagination, for the sake of renunciation, for the sake of letting go, on the path to that kind of liberation.

Or when we practice metta, or compassion, or mudita—here's this being, and I'm imagining them. Maybe I don't have a clear visual sense, but I sense in my imagination somehow their particular being, and I wish them happiness, peace, etc. These are skillful uses and mindful uses of the imagination.

With all that, as we talked about in the Q&A today, I might actually employ a real embodiment. I really have the mindfulness of the body and the image of the other, and it's a skillful, embodied, mindful use of the imagination. It may or may not be imaginal, but it's helpful. We can have healing images of all manner—again, mindful, embodied probably, not necessarily imaginal. They may be imaginal, they may

not be imaginal.

Towards the end of this spectrum, somewhere along that line, we say there is the realm of the imaginal. These kinds of images, or this experience of images, is what we're calling imaginal.

Some of you know this word imaginal is actually not that old in the English language, but it's getting quite popular in different circles. You may have come across different authors or people speaking about it. What I want to say is that the way we are using that word imaginal—it's not to say our way is the right way or the only way or the true way. There are similarities, overlaps, and differences between the way we are using that word imaginal, unfolding these kinds of teachings, and what you might have read in Hillman or Jung or Corbin. Overlaps, but some real differences.

We want to outline and highlight different aspects or elements of the imaginal. We can talk about when these elements are there—we could say something like, "This experience now is authentically imaginal," or "This is now the genuine imaginal," but very, very lightly with that.

We could run through a list, and in fact that's what we're going to do. I'll go through it very quickly tonight and begin to touch on the first couple of elements. As we go through the week, we're going to go through this list, highlighting these aspects or elements of what's involved in imaginal experience.

Before I even do that, I want to ask us all to consider and open up our attitude and our relationship with lists like these and teachings like these. They can get, sometimes, for some people at different times, very dry or dogmatic or very rigid or very tight or very right or wrong. I'm really not a big fan of that. But there's something about highlighting distinctions that actually will serve the soul-making and serve the practice.

The list is not even exhaustive. It's not complete—that's it now, full stop, that's the testament of the soul-making gospel, it's finished. It's not even an exhaustive list, but what we're trying to do is open up the attention in a way that can open up and deepen and make more full the practice. So not dogma, not to be held too rigidly or too tightly, and not exhaustive.

As I proceed through this list, I want to emphasize that I'll be moving quickly through all twenty-eight elements. Some will be familiar to you, while others may seem completely foreign at first. Think of this as seed-planting—I'm simply scattering concepts that we'll cultivate and explore more deeply throughout the week.

So, aspects of the imaginal—twenty-eight elements, at least. Remember, this isn't exhaustive. One crucial point we'll return to repeatedly is the relationship between different elements. Some overlap and naturally imply each other, while others create a kind of tension, pulling in seemingly opposite directions. There's a dialectical relationship at play here, which we'll unpack as we progress.

[Brief interruption about lighting]

Alright, twenty-eight elements for now.

The first is the very fact of the lattice itself. I use this word deliberately—these elements form what we might call a constellation or lattice of interconnected aspects. Picture a three-dimensional structure from high school chemistry—those molecular models with balls connected by rods, or think of scaffolding, or even a chandelier. It's a network where elements connect and support each other in complex ways.

This is crucial to understand: when we speak of the imaginal, we don't simply mean *that* image—whether it's a scene from Lord of the Rings or the figure of Dumbledore. Dumbledore isn't necessarily imaginal unless these elements are present. To the degree that these elements manifest in my relationship with Dumbledore, to that degree the experience becomes imaginal for me in that moment.

The lattice itself—this first element—points to something involving both the object of perception and the subject perceiving, and most importantly, the relationship between them. This might be the most abstract concept on our list, but it forms the foundation.

The second element is the energy body, which we've already discussed extensively. When the imaginal emerges...

For something to be imaginal, there has to be energy body awareness present.

The third aspect is love and being loved. An imaginal image loves me, loves you, and I love it. We're going to go into more detail on all of these.

Fourth: eros.

Fifth: beauty. Imaginal images are beautiful. The scope of that beauty might be much broader than a narrow conception, but there's a sense of beauty there.

The sixth is trust. There's a relationship of trust with an imaginal image. Some of these nodes are not obvious at first, and this is the point—to highlight them, to draw our attention to them.

The seventh is that it's soul-making. An imaginal image actually brings a sense of soulfulness. It opens up the sense of soulfulness. It *is* soul-making. The eros-psyche-logos dynamic, the dynamic of soul-making, gets galvanized and moved into action. So an image that doesn't do that, for me, right now, is not imaginal.

The eighth is a sense of dimensionality. There's more to it than just the flat surface, the flatland materiality of things. That dimensionality moves into divinity. So we could call that two different aspects or nodes of the lattice, or just one: dimensionality shading into divinity. Something that feels sacred and divine about imaginal images.

Related to that, the ninth is a beyondness, an unfathomability. There's a sense of something more. This image has something more, some mystery beyond that I can't quite capture or put into words or get my head around—and actually that's unfathomably deep, that beyondness. It's right there in and through the

image, but it's got a beyondness to it.

The tenth: an imaginal image has soft and elastic edges. Its boundaries are indefinite. Even if in my mind's eye, if it's a visual image, I can see every little micro hair and it's sharply delineated visually, it's got soft and elastic edges. We'll come back to what that means. The boundaries are indefinite.

Eleventh: eternality. Timelessness. Again, some of you may have noticed some of this and some not. An imaginal image has a dimension to it that feels eternal, timeless.

Twelfth: there's a sense in the relationship with an imaginal image of reverence. The heart, the soul has a reverent relationship with the imaginal.

Thirteenth: there's a sense of grace. Something is given to me, something is visiting me in this image, through this image. This image is a gift from the divine.

Fourteenth: humility. This is a subjective note that the heart, the soul feels humble—we'll explain what that means—humble in relation to this beauty, this image.

Fifteenth: not reduced.

The image, I'm not reducing it to "this is" or "this means this." This is a representation of this aspect of my mind or soul or my history. This represents something in my history—when this happened, or that wounding, or this quality of compassion, or this power. It's not reducible. It cannot be reduced to "it means X or Y." It's more than that. Or rather, it doesn't only mean X or Y. It can have those individual meanings, but it's always more. Not ultimately reducible.

Number sixteen: autonomy. The image is not simply part of me. I'm not sensing it or conceiving it as just some element of myself—a sub-personality or some aspect of my psyche. It's its own being, in the same way that Joel here is his own being. He has his autonomy. There's a sense that the being has its own autonomy and in a way can act independently. But I also have my autonomy. So the autonomy is double—of self and other, of self and image.

Related to that is seventeen: there's twoness. I realize I'm going very quickly. I'm just casting out seeds right now. There's this sense of twoness that we've worked so much with. There's the image and there's me. There's twoness. It doesn't dissolve into oneness.

There's a quality of theatre—number eighteen. This is somewhere between real and not real, the imaginal middle way. It has that quality to it.

Nineteen: we recognize that we both create this image and discover this image, or somewhere in between creation and discovery. That's part of the gestalt of the whole constellation of the relationship.

Twenty: what we're going to call the concertina. We'll explain what that means. There are other images waiting in the wings of the theatre. This isn't the only image.

Number twenty-one: there's slightly less fabrication. There's this fluidity that we touched on in the Q&A. A little less clinging, so things become less fabricated, more fluid, more malleable.

Number twenty-two: an imaginal experience is not a non-conceptual experience. Logos is involved. Concept is involved. An imaginal experience is not a non-conceptual experience. Concept is involved. We also touched on the energy body in the Q&A. We'll go through all of this again. I'm aware how fast I'm going. We're going to go through each point. I'm just sprinkling some seeds right now.

Twenty-three: what I want to call fullness of intentions. I'm not trying to get something from this image. I'm not primarily trying to get something for this image. I'm certainly not trying to win the lottery or even trying to empower myself, for instance, or my psychological process. I've got a fullness of intention. I'm in it for something bigger. My intention is for God, for the divine, for the soul. Not just for me, not primarily for me, so that I can be better at this, so that I can develop this or that. Fullness of intention.

Twenty-four is a sense of duty. Where there's soul-making, there's a sense of duty. Somehow it comes into my life with a sense of asking me something. It's a subtle one. We have to be careful with that.

Twenty-five is meaningfulness. So an image is pregnant with meanings, plural. I cannot reduce it to just several meanings. It has a kind of infinite cloud of meaningfulness, which I might not even be able to isolate. It means this or that.

Twenty-six, and I'm not really going to explain this right now, is there's an infinite echoing, an infinite mirroring between the imaginal image and my life. They mirror each other like two mirrors facing each other and just mirroring each other endlessly in a subtle way.

Twenty-seven is an aspect of what's involved in the imaginal: our values. Aesthetic values—that's in the beauty—but also moral values. So things like goodness, kindness, nobility, courage, even cunning, these kinds of things. An image, if you like, embodies values. It's not reducible to values, but values are involved.

And lastly, a sense of deep participation. That's twenty-eight.

That's a lot, and you might be feeling like, "Oh my goodness me." But these are things to notice, and we're going to go through them, and a lot of them are already there in your experience. It's a matter of kind of naming and getting familiar with them. So, just rattle that through to plant seeds.

What we want to say, because we really don't want to be rigid with this: there's a spectrum here. All these aspects, from papañca on one side, and then all these aspects, and so on. At what point is the cut-off point to what we're calling imaginal? We could put it anywhere. Am I going to get upset about where it is? There's a direction that we can open up further as more of these aspects get involved, rather than someone saying, "That is or that isn't imaginal." Do you understand? We don't want to get self-judging or quibble too much about it.

Is this making vague sense? Yeah, good, good.

So we're talking about a spectrum, not an on-off switch or black and white or something I've failed, I haven't—you know, it's a movement, it's an opening, it's a direction.

Why are we even talking about this? One reason is just for the sake of clarity and for the sake of clarity in terms of what we mean when we use that word "imaginal," which is, as I said, different than what other people might mean in some respects, but also clarity in terms of understanding the whole kind of conceptual framework of what we're creating and discovering here with this soul-making dharma. That the more I get clear about all this stuff, the more it will help me get clear about the whole vision and the whole of what's involved and the whole concept of what's involved in this kind of path. So that's one reason: for the sake of clarity and understanding and the conceptual framework.

The second reason has to do with actual practice and the art of practice. Becoming familiar with these aspects, they begin to function as kind of keys. So this particular key of any one of these nodes, when I activate it, when I turn that key, it opens the door into the imaginal realm. Or if we take the lattice or the network image, igniting one node can then ignite the whole lattice so that one moves more towards the fully imaginal, the authentically imaginal, the genuinely imaginal.

So, for example, I could pick any element there, and let's say that aspect of timelessness. I'm with an image. It doesn't quite feel imaginal and deep and that whole kind of richness there. And then I begin to pay attention to the quality of time in and around that image. And I notice, "Oh, it does have this kind of strangely timeless dimension, hard to put it into words." We'll talk about it. And noticing that illuminates that particular node, that particular element, that particular dot in the lattice, and it's like it ignites, it comes on fire, and then that might ignite the whole thing.

Does that make sense?

So, one mode for practice is just to notice, just to notice these elements. You're not so much making them happen as notice what's already there, that at first the consciousness doesn't quite realize. I don't quite pick up on these elements.

As I look a little closer, I see—oh yes, oh yes—and then I dwell with that and resonate with that element. Something comes alive, ignites in the whole lattice.

You can also wiggle or jiggle one of the nodes, deliberately activate it. For example, the energy body: making that more open, pervading the awareness there activates that node, and that might help us move more into the imaginal.

Or you can deliberately start with something accessible to you. Perhaps you're simply sitting, feeling your life and being in the moment, and you sense a vague reverence. You don't even know exactly what you feel reverent toward, or perhaps there's a sense of humility in relation to who knows what. Some sense is there, or it's accessible to you. You can find your way into a sense of humility or that vague reverence. So you deliberately activate that node, deliberately ignite that, open that—and this can open the door to the

larger network of the imaginal.

It might be the middle way sense that was one of the nodes I outlined, this quality of between-ness. If you're familiar with emptiness practices and you practice some kind of emptiness meditation where there's a sense of all things being empty, well, that's close enough to the imaginal middle way, and then it becomes much easier for the imaginal to get ignited and opened up. Or the energy body, or time, as we discussed.

So that's the general concept. As I said, we'll go through and cover this again. I'm hoping and trusting that even if it sounds a bit overwhelming and dense right now, you'll actually get the hang of it and it will be quite helpful in practice and understanding.

Let me touch on the first two elements briefly: the lattice and the energy body.

The first aspect of the imaginal is the very fact that it has different aspects, that it has different elements. The lattice itself is an aspect of the imaginal—realizing that, sensing that, knowing that. The network, the fact of its multi-aspected constitution. This imaginal is a multi-aspected phenomenon.

What this means is that image is in the eye of the beholder. We say beauty is in the eye of the beholder. Beauty and the imaginal have a lot in common—a great deal in common. The more you understand imaginal, the more you understand beauty, and vice versa.

So we say beauty is in the eye of the beholder, and image is in the eye of the beholder. This network of relationships—the nodes and the lattice—needs to be there. It's dependent on that for something to be imaginal. Some of those elements are just here, like energy body awareness or humility. They're part of the subject, nodes that belong to the subject as opposed to the object. Something like the dimensionality of the image or the divinity of the image is part of the object, the imaginal object. My humility in that moment is part of the subject.

So Lord of the Rings, Harry Potter—all that mythic material with kings and warriors and queens and wizards and dragons—is not inherently imaginal. It might be when that relationship, when the nodes of the lattice come alive. Or something mundane, like the hair on my arm—it's not usually imaginal, but it can be if that aliveness comes into the relationship.

It's not inherently just in the image. It's dependent on that aliveness and fullness of relationship as well.

That's the first element. The second one we've touched on already—energy body awareness. This is part of the imaginal constellation. When there's craving in relation to something, even in relation to an image, the energy body contracts and I tend to lose energy body awareness and its largeness. Craving contracts.

When I open up the energy body in relation to someone or something or an image, it helps to transform, to transubstantiate the craving into eros. When I open up energy body awareness, craving opens into eros.

And then I have an erotic relationship with this image, with this other, with this thing. And the eros opens up the imaginal. So that if I can come into full energy body, can I be in relationship to this thing, to this person, to this image, to this tree, to whatever it is? Can I be in relationship with my whole energy body? Can I see it with my whole energy body? Can I see with my body?

The more I do that, the more I'm activating, igniting this particular node of the energy body, and the more chance there is of the whole relationship becoming erotic-imaginal.

We touched on this in the Q&A, so in a way we're opening up the sense of what energy body can mean. It's the felt sense here of texture or vibration in this space, but it also involves image—the image of body—and also the concept of body. So that's all involved in the energy body.

The concept of body that's involved in the energy body is not limited to our usual ones. You see this body: Am I attractive? Am I not attractive according to whatever is the current human fashion in my culture? I've got a concept of body that way that's not going to support soul-making. Or a purely, flatly materialistic view—just a bunch of molecules that are hanging together for a while in some kind of way that they produce organic life. That's a concept that's not going to support soul-making.

So the concept that's active with energy body encompasses, includes, but is broader than our usual concepts of body and matter.

And lastly—and we've said this many times—energy body has a huge range in terms of that felt sense. It can be dense and dark, like the roots of a tree, like the roots of an oak tree. It's dense and dark, or like stone, or like sand, or like liquid, or water, or like air. The texture can feel that way, or like light, or like space. The range is huge, absolutely huge. All that is the playground of energy body.

That's the general concept and the sprinkling of the seeds of the twenty-eight aspects and the first two, just briefly. Does it make sense?

So this will be one of the main threads. We'll just go through and touch on a few nodes each day and just kind of illuminate them so they can serve to germinate in your practice.

"I have a question."

"Would you like me to lift your name?"

"I think so, if that's okay, Simon. I think there's just been quite a lot of talking today, so that'd be good."

"Let's have a little quiet time."

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