On Practising with Images (Q & A)

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 1:10:33

Sorry to be a little late. There's not that many questions, so let's see how it goes, but we could also open it up to live questions and comments if that feels good. I haven't even had a chance to really look at them or put them in a particular order, so let's just see.

The first question reads: "A few weeks ago an image came to me in which the other was me. Not in a sense that the image was me as witnessed by me interacting with another, but me interacting with another version of myself. In the image, I was standing on a landscape, vast and seemingly empty. I felt the soft caress of hands at my back, beckoning me to turn. When I turned around, I saw myself standing in front of me. There was still a self-sense and a sense of other, but also a jolt of recognition that this was me.

"The self I was beholding flickered in and out of being—each time she appeared slightly different, as though seen through a different lens or the way different people at different times might perceive me in daily life. The energy body felt very rooted during this image, yet at the same time a shock of surprise ran through me like a bolt of electricity, followed by joy washing over me and a slight indecision as to how to proceed next.

"I could feel a narrowing in me, a leaning toward the imaginal me, wanting to hold on to her. What felt most soulful to me right then was to bow to the imaginal self and gently turn around. As I did so, I could feel her arms sliding around my back and waist and holding me in embrace. Tears came at this point, as well as an intense sense of well-being and homecoming.

"This is the first time I have interacted with an imaginal version of myself and the surprise slightly interfered with my ability to practice with this image skillfully. Could you say something about this kind of image and pointers for practicing with it?"

Beautiful. In a way, not to set up expectations, but I would expect at some point or other this kind of thing to happen. Maybe to say it better in another way: in some way or another, working with images—and I think I said this at some point—the self-sense gets caught up in, invited into, roped up in, included in the soul-making process. It gets included in what becomes imaginal.

Sometimes it can happen in this more indirect way where we're working with an object. I gave the example of looking at, let's say, this candle flame that became imaginal for me. As I'm enjoying that and lingering with it and feeling the resonances, if I don't narrow my attention too much to the object, at some point I start to see: "Oh, hold on, the image here includes myself. The self pole, the subjective pole has become image as well as the candle." And then I can explore—I could lean my attention to exploring the

imaginal self that is arising in relation to this candle. So that would be one way, and it's very common.

Another possibility is that the image somehow—even if it doesn't feel like at the time that I'm working meditatively with it, even if I'm not noticing so much of the self becoming an imaginal self in relationship to it—implicit in that element of infinite mirroring and echoing and duty and these kinds of elements, there's already implication for self-sense and the actual sense, view and images we have of ourselves in our lives. So it's not necessarily right then; it's more subtle and it seeps out into the life, into the being and into the sense of self we have in life.

And then other times, something happens much more like what's in this report—something much more direct, where we really feel or witness the self as image. This can happen in all kinds of ways, but sometimes it is quite startling.

In a way, I would expect, let's say, in time with imaginal and soul-making practice, I would expect the sense of self as imaginal. Going back to the opening in that ritual when I was saying you may not have landed then by saying "you are image"—what is it to know yourself as image? What is it to know yourself as angel? This is what I'm talking about.

Something happens and the self-view, self-ideation, self-view, self-sense, self-image starts getting infected, infiltrated, caught up in, involved in the soul-making. And so what happens when we become imaginal is that very self-sense starts to become imaginal with all the nodes. We start to have eros for ourselves. We start to love ourselves in a whole different way. We start to recognize our own dimensionality and our own divinity.

Of course, culturally, this doesn't fit at all. In the wider culture, to say that I sense my own divinity—I mean, divinity on its own is a problem. And then to say self, we get such limited and confused and confusing indoctrination about the self in our culture, in our wider culture. On one hand, it's a very egoistic culture, of course, that's very individualistic and kind of caters to and supports a very superficial kind of thinking about the self—a kind of ego celebration. And on the other, we kind of get shamed for that kind of thing. So we get—do you understand what I mean? You're not supposed to be egoic, and yet it's an extremely egoic culture.

We receive these confused and confusing mixed messages. The same contradictions plague our understanding of sexuality—everything is muddled and bewildering.

But at some point we begin to sense ourselves as image and we sense our own blessedness. We have a reverence for ourselves. We sense this dimensionality. We sense I am more than what I'm told I am. And that "more" is not just expansive horizontally—not simply that I could choose to become an airplane pilot or brain surgeon if I wanted. No, I am more not only horizontally, but vertically, so to speak.

We start to really receive a palpable and moving sense, a deeply touching recognition of our own divinity—that we are the face of, let's say, at least one angel. We are the representation, the emanation of

angel in this life and may be tasked with sacred work. All of this neither real nor not real, this imaginal middle way.

Given the usual history we carry both personally and culturally in terms of how we view the self, this opening is oftentimes utterly startling. I was speaking with someone recently about this unfolding to a whole other level. This person had done considerable work on self, had been in the Dharma for years with the teaching of no-self, no-self, no-self—self isn't important. Then they engaged a Diamond Heart approach where there's more emphasis on self, exploring and valuing the self, discovering who you are. And then came this entirely new dimension with the imaginal and the divinity of the self—the sense even of angels looking at the self, recognizing, being seen as angels, seen by angels.

If this becomes too rarefied, then the people around you are in for a rough time, and probably you will be at some point as well. But if we can stay somewhere within that actually quite wide range—the wide boulevard of the imaginal middle way—then there's so much fertility, so much joy, so much healing.

This transforms our sense of self and existence, our understanding of what we're doing here, our relationship to life and death. When I say I'm already dead, it's because I can sense myself as image and I sense that angelic mirroring or function or emanation. That recognition makes a difference to everything.

This journey into the self becoming recognized as image—with all the reverence and humility and beauty and eros—this is exactly the kind of opening that's possible. How rare is it in our culture to really know how beautiful you are? That's why I say it to you. We don't really grasp it. Our concept of beauty is so thin. When understanding deepens to another level, up-levels, there's no end to it. This is the kind of opening that can unfold, with such riches pouring forth.

If we know to expect this possibility, it might be less surprising and startling, which helps us receive it.

In some spiritual traditions—for example, the way Henri Corbin interprets certain Sufi and Islamic mystical traditions like Ibn Arabi—they speak of the angel out ahead. That angel out ahead is me. In that metaphysic, I have a kind of angelic counterpart. You have an angelic counterpart. We each have an angelic counterpart, and that angelic counterpart is the face of God for us. But it's us. We are the face of God. So we expect to encounter this if we're practicing well and if we're blessed with such grace.

Much of the soul-making work involves discovering how this natural dynamic is being prevented—how the natural expansion and fertilization and fermentation of the soul-making process is blocked by certain ideas or fixations or fixed views or certain images, whether cultural or personal, or in terms of our meditative capacity. Often the work is simply recognizing, "Oh, that's been a taboo in my mind," and acknowledging that, perhaps softening it. Or recognizing that I hold a certain view that's obstructing the process—some philosophical view about reality, among other things.

So it may be less about making this happen and more about noticing where something might suggest itself, and I might think, "Oh, I can't possibly do that." Or some kind of ideation might arise. As Catherine

framed the question: Tell me an idea you have about sacredness that prevents the opening to more sacredness.

In terms of practical guidance for this work, the same principles apply: bringing the energy body there, bringing the heart, sometimes asking subtly if it wants anything—everything we've discussed regarding the imaginal.

This kind of opening might have quite an impact, because it's so profound. You have to be careful of the pacing. It may be that you want to linger longer because it's so rich or touching, so you take your time. You might want to deliberately return to this kind of image.

If this happens as a one-off experience, it might leave you thinking, "Wow, that was amazing," or perhaps "I couldn't quite grasp it." But a single experience may not be sufficient to truly begin changing the sense of self as it walks down Newton Abbot High Street or navigates difficult situations. It may require dipping in and out, returning to work with such images, and perhaps lingering in the post-meditative state as well.

I walk into the garden. How does the world look when I've just encountered that kind of divinity, self as divinity?

What's my sense of my existence, but also existence itself? You get a feel for how it spreads out and infects and involves everything else. That's one of the ways these images start to really seep down into the psyche. And it's not necessarily in the intensity of some moments of meditation, beautiful as that can be. It might be more in these moments of—I had it before in the meditation, now I'm just sitting waiting for my tea to brew or whatever it is. And maybe I can just bring the memory of it back, and again, the energy body, and just notice: well, how do I feel? How do things look with the tincture, with the almost homeopathic drops of that image coming in again and again?

The self-sense, of course, is one of the most entrenched things. It's why the Buddha and so many Buddhists give so much attention to the problem of self. So the more we shift it in imaginal practice—this way, that way, shift it, sit with it, see what the effects of that view are, come back to another view of self, etc.—the more we do that, the more malleable and open the whole sense of self becomes. And something like this, where we're really, in a very humble and touching way, recognizing deeply the holiness and beauty and divinity and angelic nature and function of our own selves—that's quite a shift, as I said, from the usual view. And so repeating it, you know, again and again—it's not something you need to grasp at or try and hang on to twenty-four seven. No, it can come and go, and it starts to have its effect.

Is there any more with that? Is that okay? Very beautiful, and exactly the kind of thing I would expect—and incredibly important. Incredibly important.

Something is unclear to me about the possibility of the self becoming imaginal in relation to an imaginal other, and how it fits with the elements. For example, this morning I encountered an imaginal other person, but I was a bird of prey. My energy body was the bird's body as well as my experience of the

other, et cetera. Should I have also retained a sense of my human self relating to both the bird and the imaginal person? It feels like that would have been a rather different image.

I think I understand. So with a lot of these things, I don't think there's a right or wrong. And one of the general things I would want to say—and I've sort of said it at other times or other talks or whatever, maybe other retreats—if I think back to when I first started playing with all this stuff and exploring it and trying to make sense of it all, the kind of images I had were quite different from the kind of images I have now. And they were kind of long sagas with casts of thousands and very complicated plots and stuff like that, and all kinds of things going on. Now I kind of feel like it's much more—what's the word?—condensed. What appears is what's important, and the extraneous stuff has fallen away. It's less complicated.

But I wouldn't necessarily at all go back to that self—whenever it was, four or five years ago, six years, whatever—and say, you know, that's wrong or something. I had to, and I really had to work on the trust. So often, every time there's an image, there's like: am I doing this right? This can't be right. Surely not that kind of image. Or maybe this is too this or too that.

So yes, we talk—some of you were in the explanation about the elements. Yes, we talk about okay, what do we mean when we say fully imaginal? And can we kind of support it there? But you also want to kind of trust what comes up. So less about right or wrong. And sometimes you just have to kind of go with what is and trust that as you attune to what's appearing and work with it as best you can and incorporate the teachings, the whole practice will evolve.

That's a general point. It's not necessarily pertaining just to this note. But there's something about just diving in and trusting, and not trusting the mind that says, "Nah, this probably isn't right. I'll wait for something better." I actually expect that thought to come up most times. I expect it. And the answer is: okay, thank you, and then just get on with it.

So encouragement to trust. And even if we're talking and saying, actually, to be fully imaginal is more like this, not so much like this—don't worry so much. Just dive in. Get wet. Get your feet dirty. Get your hands dirty.

Play with it. Be touched. Sometimes you'll feel like, oh, you did a session. It was like, well, I don't know. Was that worth it or not? It's fine. You're exercising a lot of qualities just by engaging and working and trying to tune and paying attention. Do you understand? So trust. Trust your process.

In this question, should I have also retained a sense of the human self? Because she had become this bird, this bird of prey, as well as some other imaginal figure. Relating to both the bird and the imaginal person, they're both options. In other words, you could let yourself be completely that bird of prey in relation to the imaginal other.

Actually, you won't ever be completely the bird of prey. There will always be some kind of sense of, I

know that I'm me as a meditator sitting here. I'm not like, oh, goodness—you know, like in Kafka's Metamorphosis or something. It's like, what am I going to do now? And will they serve me worms and bird food? Don't worry about it. There's always going to be some degree of the meditator witness watching.

But the options—you have the option of just going fully into the self becomes that bird. And then you can trust that in the infinite echoing of things, it will spill over into one's life in time, in its implications. It will have multiple meaningfulness and multiple meanings in relation to one's life and all that. So that's one option. Another option is to take this seat more consciously and watch the two of them. So it's a double image and they're interacting. And it's not right or wrong. They're just both options.

This looks like the same person, so I'm going to skip that for now. In the artistic story of the seven stories, beauty as a way to draw souls to new vistas is mentioned. I presume this beauty could include grief, fervor, depiction of harsh realities such as in war, et cetera, thinking of artworks of the past. As a sister of justice and truth, could art also inspire souls to action? Many thanks to you both.

So can art also inspire souls to action? Absolutely. Yeah, definitely. And I think there's more than one question there, but let's just linger for a second. Yes, there is. So it's funny. I mean, again, I'll give my opinions as an artist, but they're just my opinion. So, you know, it's me with the mic on right now.

But I feel that's one of art's functions. Absolutely. But it doesn't need always to be so obvious or deliberate. So I listen to a lot of music that has no lyrics to it, no nothing. There's no programs. It's just abstract music or abstract art. You think about a Rothko or a de Kooning or whatever. It's just abstract art. To me, if the art is deep and if my engagement with it is deep and it's touching me deeply, it makes me want to live differently. It does something to my sense of values. It does something to my sense of self and what I want to manifest in the world and what's important. It heightens my sensitivity. It opens my heart and my care. There's nothing in a Rothko where it's got three slabs of color.

How is it that those three slabs of color do something to my sense of caring for humanity? What's going on there? To me, it's part of the mystery of art. And then, of course, you get art that's much more programmatic or deliberately depicting something that's clearly trying to inspire action or political consciousness. That's great too.

Art and imaginal—they're almost synonymous for me. They're the same thing. And so you're going to get the soul being touched at levels that, as Rilke said, you need to change your life. "I saw the statue," and this depiction of the statue, and suddenly at the end of the poem, "you need to change your life." To me, certain music—it's all the same. It has that degree of impact. So absolutely, either in an obvious way or a less obvious way.

There was a question in the notes: beauty could include grief for the depiction of harsh realities such as in war, et cetera. Absolutely. So again, all these elements of the imagination that we talk about—all these elements—they're open-ended. They're medicine, and I have to drink it.

Typically, we took the examples I gave—for some of you, for those who weren't in the lounge earlier—let's take two or three of the elements of the imaginal: the numinous, love, eros, and beauty. Very easily we can think, "Oh, love is like this. This is what love looks like. It manifests in this form or in this form." But you can get a very stern kind of love, or a harsh kind of love, or a fierce kind of love. Those are faces of love that sometimes we forget.

What happens with the imaginal is if we can hang out and—again, not just believe what the mind is saying immediately: "Oh, this can't be right," or "It's threatening me," or "Well, this image seems to want to stab me or devour me or chop off my head or eat my intestines or whatever it is. That can't be love." Check it out. You don't have to do anything. But if you linger a little bit, you'll start to notice, "Oh, that's weird. It's this expression of my intestines being eaten. It's a certain form of love that I haven't encountered before." You don't often hear it in pop songs and things like that. But actually you can feel it in your being.

So a lot of this has to do with sensitivity. It's like your eyes get used to the dark. "Hold on, wait a minute. There is a kind of love here." And then the sense of what love means and can look like—the forms and expressions love can take—grows. Same with eros, same with beauty, same with all of them, in fact.

So yes, beauty can be terrible, dark, violent, apocalyptic, grief-filled—all of that. Actually, I would say grief, when we're relating to it in a good way, in a way that's helpful, has a kind of beauty in it. There's something about the way the heart is holding and feeling that grief that allows grief to be beautiful. Actually, it's even possible with anger and things like that. But definitely, yes.

Is that enough about that question? There was another one: "Can you say more about boundary? My image sometimes has clear boundary and sometimes dissolves or partly melts. When it's distinct, it's distinct. Is that the imagination before it becomes imaginal? Can a figure be sometimes imagination, then evolving into imaginal and back in one sitting?"

In terms of this last question—can a figure be sometimes imagination, in other words non-imaginal image, then evolving into imaginal and back in one sitting? Absolutely. Again, an image or an object in the world is not inherently one thing or another.

What makes it imaginal is the way of relating to it, the way of looking at it, the way of being with it. So in one sitting, certainly, something could start off as complete fixation, for example—here's this person and I'm really attracted to them and I want them and I this or that or whatever. It's possible, if I work well, that the craving and reification wrapped up there actually gets softened and transmuted into eros and the sort of theater-like quality of the imaginal middle way. And then the thing can become imaginal.

Or, for example, I'm with something and it's already imaginal. Then I lose my energy body or I get a bit reified about it and it becomes a real thing. And then I can just sense that some of the depth and dimensionality and beauty and mystery has gone out of it. When I said it will happen, it absolutely will happen. Eros will go to craving many times, and there are degrees.

Something that's imaginal becomes flat. Something that's flat is allowed to become imaginal again. No problem. The task of practice is to just recognize that, expect it, recognize it. Oh, what does it need now? What does it need? But you start to get quite sensitive to when images are flat images and when they're more fully imaginal in our sense of the word. So absolutely. And it's just a matter of, okay, now what needs tweaking? What needs supporting? What needs help there?

In terms of the dissolving and melting images, Rowan is saying there was an image, an imaginal figure, and it just dissolved into sort of water droplets by itself. And that was beautiful. Now here's a question: Was the beauty a soulful beauty? Or was it just kind of, oh, that's pretty? It was soulful, beautiful.

I don't think there's a right or wrong here. What you may want to be interested in is if that sort of thing happens all the time, then you might be thinking, okay, well, let's sometimes see if I can keep it back as a figure. But if it happens sometimes, you can just go with it. The image has changed, but the soulmaking is still there and the beauty is still there. And that's really fine. So again, your sense of the soulfulness at any time can lead you. If it's soulful, if it feels soulful, if the energy body is involved, if it's touching the being and the soul, then just go with it.

Can I share about the Aslan thing? On another retreat, Rowan was sharing that she had an image of Aslan, the lion king from The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe. Sometimes in the meditation, what happened was that figure would kind of dissolve into a vast space. But that vast space was imbued by the character, the essence of Aslan.

This is, I think for now, I would like to keep as a sort of more rare option, but definitely I'm mentioning it as a possibility. It doesn't have—it's not a figure because the obvious form has gone, but it's still specific and it's still got the character of Aslan. So there's still personhood and particularity, even though it's not in the figure itself.

So if those things are there, you're still in the realm of the imaginal. It's great. It's just the form has changed. And so the job with the water droplets might be the same. Oh, is this now the same essence? Am I touched by it or is it a different one? Maybe it's a different one and that's fine too. Different feel, yeah. So then the job would be, okay, can I tune to that and get the sense of the soul of that and the practice would be the same.

Yeah, but you know those water droplets, they might then become alive in a way that water droplets are not usually alive for us. Does that answer?

Yeah, very good. So the question is, is it worth staying with a flat image and waiting for it to become imaginal or hoping or working for it to become imaginal? Or should you just wait for something that's obviously more imaginal? Experiment. I don't think anything other than experimenting. You need to kind of taste these things for yourself and taste what's possible and discover for yourself what's possible.

I guess there's a lot of stuff that moves through the mind that's just obviously flotsam and jetsam of the

mind, but some of that, and as a technique sometimes, maybe as a last resort technique, but sometimes what passes through as a daydream, weirdly—you might be trying to be with your breath and then this daydream comes and it feels like that's just a waste of time—and then you start lingering with it, and it actually can become imaginal. So it's hard to tell in advance sometimes, but the more you do this, the more you'll get a feel of the potential of something.

Working with an image, I want to know more about it. This desire creates, discovers more details, texture, qualities of its particular face and manifestation. This particularity and its intricacy is meaningful, but sometimes ends up defining the image more and more, closing dimensionality and unfathomability. Still, the particular appearance feels precious. Could you say something about this balance, how to hold both?

I guess I wouldn't be from the beginning just convinced that it's necessarily the intricacy and the particularity per se that needs to somehow close the image or define it.

Let's just imagine I had a visual image and maybe it's a gate that opens, and I'm somehow moved by this gate. I don't even understand. There's something beautiful about this threshold and these gates. And then as I'm with the image, maybe the gates have those kind of filigree designs in them. And it's like, wow, like you get in some mosques and stuff like that. And it's like, wow, that's really beautiful.

The question really is whether the filigree itself feels soul-making or feels like a relevant, a soulfully relevant aspect of the image. So really what I want to navigate within an image—images start getting complex—and what I want to navigate towards is what feels soulful and soul-making. Everything else is kind of secondary.

Sometimes, especially if you're not used to working with the imagination per se a lot, sometimes the imagination is really not very vivid, and sometimes it's extraordinarily vivid. Like sometimes you could close your eyes and see every little hair on someone's chin, for example. Now, it might be that seeing those hairs is soul-making for whatever reason, but it might just be, yeah, okay, it's visually vivid, but so what?

So you have to kind of gauge what feels soul-making at any time. And that's what you kind of want to gravitate towards and linger with and resonate with.

But it might also be that the way that I start to pay attention to some element in an image or some particular particularity of an image is forgetting some of the elements of the imaginal, some of the nodes, or it's a bit too—I'm startled by the visual detail and I just kind of go like that. And then it becomes a kind of visualization exercise or a concentration exercise. Or it may be that in my relationship with it, it's a bit too craving. I now want something. Oh, yes, now we're getting somewhere. So there's something more in the subject pole rather than the object pole that's causing it to become flat a bit.

I often encounter images of a specific moment which has a quality of timelessness, but also encapsulates temporal circumstances. For example, two men drinking sake on a porch at night. I know that when they were young, they had some strong karmic connection, that they haven't seen each other for many years,

and that something decisive is about to happen between them. Would you say such images have less soul-making potential? How to work skillfully with the narrative element which opens as I draw nearer such an image? Should such a situation be somehow personified so I can feel its love for me, for instance?

This is also important. Some years ago, I wanted to make a distinction between what I called an iconic image versus a narrative image. A narrative image is where you're going to do this, or this person does this, and then they do that, and then I'm going to do this—there's a narrative that usually goes toward either some great catastrophe or some great triumph, happily ever after.

I wanted to draw this distinction to point out that when we're practicing imaginatively, we're actually less interested in that narrative way that the mind uses its imagination—which can very often be like papañca, this kind of proliferative thinking, hoping, and so forth. We're more interested in images that have this timeless quality, where something is always happening.

However, what you often get are images with what I call a narrative backstory. This sounds like what's here—there's a scene, two guys on a porch drinking sake together, but there's an implicit backstory. That's fine. It's part of the richness of the image. That kind of narrative backdrop helps you understand something about what's already taken place or how it fits into a larger context. It's not a problem.

What's specific about this image is that it happens at this charged point—after many years apart, with their history, and before something else is going to happen. So the image is implicitly understood in a narrative context. The image is pregnant with this background narrative. It's contained within it, but it still has this quality of timelessness to it. This will happen quite a lot, and there's no problem at all.

Regarding whether such a situation should be personified so you can feel its love for you—I wouldn't rush toward something like that. Something's happening there. If it feels like there's some kind of soulful quality here, linger with it. You don't have to rush to think, "Okay, but where's the third node with the love and all that?"

Since you write fiction, this is the kind of thing I was alluding to earlier. There's nothing wrong with that—absolutely. It may be that your great masterpiece novel comes out of something like this. But when we're deliberately practicing imaginatively, we have a slightly different intention. We want to be guided and navigated by the compass of what feels soul-making. It feels like, "Oh, if I get too much more into the narrative, that's what I'm focusing on or interested in."

Then I feel it go flat a little bit. So, okay, what do I need to do? And sometimes it's just, okay, just that moment, just that. And what aspects of that moment—it's already quite a complex moment—what aspects of that do I need to feel the resonances with? And so much is about attuning, being attuned to the resonance, and then just lingering with those particular resonances.

So it's almost like just saying, put the brake on for now and just hover here. Like a helicopter or hummingbird or something, just hover. Like a hummingbird drinking—it's just hovering right there. And

there are other flowers, but right here, this is where the nectar is. This is where the soul-making nectar is, and I hover with that.

And another time, you can have a very different intention, which is: now is my writing time, or I'm about to go to my writing desk, and let's just play and see and get the sense of what the story is.

Sometimes the shift is so subtle—it's a bit like when we were talking about the samādhi and that bird, that eagle. The shift is so subtle that it leans it one way, changes your direction one way or another, and changes actually the whole tenor and the whole feel of what's happening. So it's really, sometimes really subtle. We have to get quite subtle at this kind of really fine attunement to where the nectar is in any moment.

*Question**: "I have noticed that when working with an erotic beloved other, sometimes the image of self gets caught up in the soul-making dynamic, and other times it shrinks and solidifies and feels unworthy. In these moments, I have made the felt sense of unworthiness primary, giving it the most attention with my energy body and offering warm metta. This is soothing, but I find it takes me out of relationship with the imaginal other. Suggestions for other ways of working with this—ways of igniting certain nodes that keep the tuning and soul-making with that specific beloved other alive. P.S. Upon writing this, I am thinking it would be interesting to focus on the loving-being loved and humility nodes. Can I sense the image's love for me? I will try."

Yes, very good. You answered it.

Again, we're either very—in our culture, in some way or another—most of us have been or still are pretty wounded in terms of the sense of self. Or if we're not wounded, we're limited by the cultural view of the sense of self. What can often happen is some kind of shame or unworthiness is a common feeling in life for many people, in relationship and in practice as well, and in relation to an imaginal other.

Sometimes, focusing on the node or the element of loving and being loved would be really helpful. In particular, sometimes I would suggest to some people with this kind of question: what does the image do in response to your feeling of unworthiness? How does the image relate to that unworthiness?

So sure, you can actually—this is fine. It's like: stop, do some mettā, bathe in warmth, let go of the image, etc. But sometimes, an image again loves us in specific ways that we don't yet know how to love ourselves in those ways, or sees us with eyes that we don't yet know how to see ourselves with.

So it might be: I feel unworthy. I feel shame. Actually, I feel like I can't bear being looked at by this image. The image is gazing at me, and it's just too much. Well, maybe I say to the image...

I can actually bring my unworthiness, my sense of unworthiness, deliberately to the image. Or my sense of: I actually can't bear your gaze. I crumble in shame, or I want to hide, or I want to bury my head, or whatever it is. And I might say to the image: "You look at me like that, and I have a feeling it's good for me,

but I just can't handle it. Or I just want to run away and hide," or whatever it is, and see what its advice is.

So the image embodies soul wisdom and soul gaze and soul love in ways that are beyond what we consciously know. So that would be another option—doing something like that.

So it's 5:34. Should we do a few more?

Yeah. Any suggestions or things to be aware of when I've done imaginal work with someone in my life upon engaging with the real person? So far, I've only encountered very healing effects on relationships or an intuitive knowing of the difference between the imaginal figure and the real, but it can still make me nervous.

I wouldn't encourage nervousness, but care with this. We haven't actually put out teachings overtly yet about—I'm not sure who wrote this, but I'm wondering if they mean actually working in real time with the other person, each becoming image for each other in real time?

Sabra's clarifying that you're not talking so much about what I just alluded to—which we haven't really taught yet, where two people are practicing in real time, each becoming image for the other and sharing that. That's a whole other level of practice which I wouldn't recommend at this point, generally, because it can get supercharged with all kinds of eros flying around and consequences that are sometimes difficult to control. But it has tremendous potential as a practice, and perhaps at some point we'll put out clearer teachings about that.

You're talking about when someone who's an actual person has also become an imaginal figure, and you're working with that image privately. Should you be nervous about that or take care? Yes, but I tend to be, at this point, more trusting and less suspicious of that than many people would be who might hear about that as a way of practicing.

Particularly if we incorporate all these other elements—humility, the non-reification, the imaginal middle way, the theater-like quality, even just the energy body—all this will keep it from being a reified, fixated kind of craving fest that then impacts the relationship in problematic ways.

I might even go further and say that to have a really deep human relationship—even if the other person is dead or doesn't know they're an imaginal figure for you—it has to involve the imaginal dimension. This would be a shift from thinking the real thing is the human, and the imaginal is some other non-real thing. But I think more and more that a really deep connection with another, when we truly love and value and care for them, involves their image for us. We have to know how to relate to that and how to handle it.

But if we take care of the elements and the sensitivity and practice, I don't think it will be a problem. Actually, I think the opposite. Sometimes people are forced into that kind of practice in relation to a person because they're an object of craving and reified, and they can't get over that. Then as I actually let them become more image—in other words, let them become more imaginal rather than less imaginal and

more so-called real—as I let them become more imaginal, let it fill out and really work with that with the fullness of my being and everything we've talked about, they gain dimensionality and amplitude, and all the pressure comes off. The need for this or that to happen in the real dissolves.

It sounds like that's your experience, and I would say that's exactly what I would expect. Would I give that instruction to absolutely everyone? No, because I don't think some people are ready for that yet, and they don't have enough wherewithal practice-wise to navigate it. But it is absolutely possible. Sometimes it might feel a little hairy—if there's a lot of craving or desire for someone, it can get difficult. But it can be done, no question about it. And as you say, it can be very, very healing.

I would repeat: is that not the fullness of human relating and who we are? That we have these other dimensions—very different than how we usually think about them.

One more question. I was with the image of a gray-haired, kindly older woman who at first embodied sisterly and then more maternal qualities—this fierce yet tender, unconditional acceptance and love. After a while, I began to feel strong stirrings of sexual desire, maybe not directly towards her, but certainly in relation to her. This freaked me out, so I started to instead view her as a lover to avoid any Freudian monkey business.

I think we have a title for our next retreat: "Post-Radiant Monkey Business."

I have a sense all three women—older sister, mother, lover—are the same imaginal image, and yet I also feel they are distinctly different. Could this be the concertina node, or is this one image embodying all these qualities?

I don't know in terms of that bit of the question. What's important is experimenting, and also what's important is: where is the question coming from? By itself, it may not be that important whether they're one image or three images. You could try it one way, you could try another. It may be just a matter of hanging out with that figure or those figures, and in time it becomes clear whether they're one or three or both one and three.

I wonder if the question is coming from apprehension about Freudian monkey business. If so, that's where I would put the attention and say: don't worry about it. Freud's been dead a long time.

There's so much of this kind of thing—this apprehension, this hesitation—I've encountered it countless times. The mind that's been conditioned in certain ways can feel that such experiences are taboo, not okay, strange. "Maybe this will make me even weirder than I already am. Maybe I'll become dangerous to others." I don't think these fears are really worth our concern.

Again, if we can introduce even a little trust, just for a few minutes—the mother in the image is not my mother. Do you understand? She may look like my mother, may even be a motherly figure, but she's not necessarily my actual mother.

We tend to reduce everything to a particular kind of psychology, one heavily based on family dynamics in infancy. And while there's tremendous value in that work—starting with Freud and all that followed—it's also quite limiting. Once we enter these practices, we're stretching and opening certain boundaries.

Does the person want to say anything more? You don't have to, of course, but I wonder whether the question about whether they're one and the same is actually gaining its charge and momentum from apprehension as much as anything else.

If you do this kind of practice enough, you will, at some point, encounter something that's pretty weird by conventional standards. Some people encounter more unusual material than others, and that's fine—there are differences in personality. But we also need to check: Am I constraining myself? Am I shutting out certain possibilities?

This isn't to say, "Come on, I want weird stuff!" It's more about asking: Am I getting in the way of something here? Rather than steamrolling over fear, could I perhaps say, "All right, I'll play with this image for two minutes and give it enough trust. Maybe there's something here." I can feel that it's weird—okay. I can sense my apprehension, but there's also something soul-making in it.

If I can attune to that and decide on just a little trust—just two minutes of trust—and tune into the soul-making while working in the ways we've discussed, then what seems pathological or disturbing gets redeemed, becomes sacred. It might remain very strange from a conventional viewpoint, but you begin developing more trust in these experiences.

Well, it's 5:47. There's one more question, though I don't know what it says. We should probably stop.

What does it say? "There are three images that seem related and are arising together. I have played with treating each image individually, but the experience is much richer and deeper when taken as if forming a three-part harmony. The energy body feels more full and alive. One of the images is visual, the others are auditory. Is this an example of the concertina element coming alive?"

Maybe, but not necessarily. It may simply be a three-part image. Again, I would trust the sense of where the energy body feels alive and where it feels more soulful.

The concertina element is as much about the sense of pregnancy in an image—that there's this quality, in different ways with images, of more: more possibility, more othernesses, more beyonds. So the concertina is, in a way, a pregnant sense of more possibility.

But simultaneously, the concertina is a kind of sense that this is not the reality. This image is not the one image, not the only image that can be presented. It's part of the loosening, non-fixating attitude that's present.

But it sounds like this is perhaps more like there's an image involving three figures, and they're in a certain kind of relation and harmony with each other—and that's the image. At least, that's how it sounds

to me.

Yes, exactly. Very good. Thank you.

Let's just sit quietly for a minute before tea.

If you don't remember anything of the particulars of what we've said today, maybe just hold this—it's actually a phrase from a Dzogchen teaching: *Trust your experience, but keep refining your view.*

This applies to emptiness teachings, but it also applies to the imaginal. Trust your experience, even if it feels like "this isn't quite right" or "it's a bit different." Trust your experience and let your view refine with all this richness of teaching and sophistication and discrimination.

So trust, get in, get your hands dirty, play and trust—and refine in time.

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