# The Way of Image

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 1:33:27

Good evening, everyone, and welcome to this series of talks. I want to try and cover certain areas in this series. Given the quite challenging conditions at the moment, let's see what's possible.

I hope in this series, after a bit of an introduction this evening, to go into certain aspects or areas of the whole skill and art or alchemy of imaginal practice, sensing the soul, with a bit more subtlety and refinement. I want to focus on the whole teaching of the elements of the imaginal—the nodes of the lattice—particular elements, and say a bit more about some of them. Perhaps, if there's an opportunity, I'll say a few things about soul making dyad practice, practicing in twos. Maybe something about ritual. We'll see.

Hopefully I'll address again, going into a little more of the philosophical underpinnings—the metaphysics, the ontology, the epistemology that are involved and necessary, if you like, as a basis or to clear enough space for soul-making dharma. Then also perhaps some reflections on the Dharma itself, meaning the tradition and our relationship with tradition and the history of that tradition, and how soul-making Dharma places itself or might be placed in relation to that tradition. And lastly, hopefully, something about ethics and opening up that area in relation to soul.

So let's see what's possible.

Tonight is basically an introduction. In a way, most of the principles I will talk about tonight are things you will hopefully already have heard, but they bear repeating, I think. Some of the examples may be new, but just by way of getting us going, placing us, situating ourselves again in the territory.

When we talk about the art or the alchemy of imaginal practice of sensing the soul, there's a lot involved in that. It actually presupposes in a way, or at least it involves, everything that we bring or learn in regular Dharma, mainstream Dharma. Everything we have to deal with as part of our Dharma practice is not outside of the constituents of soul-making practice.

Just as a person may be attracted to regular Dharma and come on retreat, for example, out of a deep attraction to the unfabricated—they may have heard something or read something, maybe not even using that language, but there's this pull, and that's the reason this particular person is practicing, that's the main pull in their soul, if you like—what do they find when they come on retreat and practice sincerely and wholeheartedly? They find they have to deal with, meet and work with en route to this realization and opening that they are longing for and enticed by. En route to that, they have to deal with, meet with and work with pain in the knee, monkey mind, their mother, all their psychological patterns and

relational patterns. All that stuff comes up and it can't just be bypassed and avoided. It's, in a way, an integral part of the path.

Very similarly with soul-making dharma, we may have heard something about images or someone tells us something, or something attracts us, or we've tasted a little bit already and gotten excited and fallen in love with it even. But we still meet all these other, seemingly more mundane obstacles, difficulties, challenges, issues—areas of practice that need attention and care and exploration. So all this is, in a way, included when we talk about what's involved in the art and alchemy of imaginal practice, sensing the soul.

Recently we taught a retreat at Gaia House called "Roots into the Ground of Soul," and Catherine and I were talking a little bit beforehand about the difference between foundations and roots, since we'd had another retreat called "Foundations of Soul-Making Dharma" the year before.

If you think about the foundation of a building, it's something that's static—it doesn't grow, it's not organic, it doesn't itself provide nourishment. It's just there as a basis, basic to allowing structure and stability to whatever you want to build on top of that. So we can talk about various foundations of soul-making dharma: energy body awareness, basic mindfulness, certain insight practices, metta, samatha—the ability to calm and gather the mind and wellbeing—all these are foundations. Certain skill with the emotions as well.

Many of these, and even some of those difficult issues that I talked about—certainly one's mother or even monkey mind or one's psychological patterns, one's relational patterns, one's bodily difficulties—all of these too can become roots. A root is something that's organic. In other words, it grows. It's not a fixed, once-and-for-all structural thing. It grows, it changes. A root, if you think about the roots of a tree, grows, changes, provides nourishment. And roots are actually themselves part of the whole living structure.

So it's not necessarily that when we talk about foundations or basics of soul-making Dharma, you need this and then you can do the soul-making Dharma. Rather, all those elements, or most of those elements that seem like foundations, can then become themselves in soul.

It's one thing to be able to be aware of your emotions, to feel them in the body, to have some skill with them. All that's great and really indispensable, and we could say those are foundations. And at a certain point, if the soul-making practice is going and blossoming and enriching itself and filling out and exploring, those very aspects of emotional life, of the heart life, become roots. In other words, they become in soul. The whole way we relate to and conceive of and sense and work with our emotions and our emotional life and how that plays out itself becomes sensed with soul. Our emotions can become imaginal in the sense that they become images, they become erotic objects for us, if you like.

There's a lot involved in this, what we're calling the art and the alchemy of imaginal practice and of sensing of soul. We'll touch on some of this in a little bit more detail as we go through these talks,

hopefully.

I think for everyone, actually, it's worth checking: just where am I with all these foundations? I've spelled them out before—the energy body skill and awareness, skill and awareness with the emotions, mindfulness, metta, samatha, and all this. Relational skills, just even emotional capacity—if we talk about emotional skill, many, many things are foundational. It's worth checking, or periodically reviewing and asking oneself: where am I with all that? How solid are my foundations? Which ones are a little bit shaky or actually not even there—that brick is missing in the structural foundation?

Because it does demand a lot, these practices that we're talking about, this whole soul-making Dharma. It does demand a lot, it asks a lot. We might hear things and be attracted, but it won't really get off the ground unless many of these pieces are there.

So, awareness. And also realization that as we grow in practice, these very foundations can themselves become transformed, can grow, ferment, rise like bread with yeast in it, and become fuller, richer, more multidimensional, more beautiful—all of that—as they become ensouled and drawn into the soul-making practices.

Okay, so I said tonight in this talk it's really just an introduction, but there are some things that bear repeating and reminding ourselves of. So it's worth taking the time to do that.

We use a lot of words, some of which are familiar sounding but used in a different way, and some will be very unfamiliar sounding to many people. Even words that are part of somewhat of a renaissance—the use of the word soul, for example, or imaginal or eros, words we use a lot. And to recognize, I think it's really important to recognize that we are using those words, words we share in common with certain other traditions today, but we're using them in very particular ways. And being clear about those delineations and definitions is, I think, really important so that certain directions open up that wouldn't otherwise open up.

So some of these words, like image or imaginal in the way that we're using it—it's hard to sum up what that is succinctly. Even eros, we could give a little formula, but it's something that needs, yes, a careful definition, but also then the living of it and the noticing of it, and it growing in us.

When we say soul, we mean something... We could give a short definition, a succinct definition of soul, which I'll do in a minute, but also to say with any definition we give, or concept we use, that there's a sort of dance on a razor's edge between precision and clarity and differentiation from other closely related concepts or other usages of the same word in different traditions. So there's that on the one hand, this need for clarity, precision, differentiation.

And on the other hand, the concepts and the words we use need to be able themselves to grow. So we don't want to pin something down conceptually or by definition in a way that's so tight that it then gets restricted and cannot be organic. So a word like soul has to retain a little bit of, A, space to grow, and B, a

kind of fuzziness—what we call soft and elastic edges. So that's an element of the imaginal, one of the nodes you'll recognize, but it also applies to the concepts that we use as well.

So there's this dance on the razor's edge between precision, clarity, differentiation on one hand, and a kind of—let's call it mystery, an organic mystery, perhaps—on the other hand.

So, having said that, we could give a definition of what we mean by soul as something like the following: Soul is that which—we say looks, but really senses—that which senses in ways that are soul-making, or that increase soul-making. So soul is that which senses in ways that feel soul-making. And again, we'd have to explain what does soul-making mean. We've talked about that before—the resonances, the depths, the dimensionality, all that.

So soul, we're using that word loosely to mean that which looks or senses in ways that support and deepen and open and increase the sense of soul-making. And it's that which wants to look in these ways, wants to sense in these ways. So axiomatic to our whole paradigm is that the soul loves soul-making, the soul wants soul-making. And so when we talk about soul-making, it's that this organ of—it's an organ of perception, of sensing in the ways that are soul-making. And it's also an organ of desire. It wants that.

So we're including sensitivities and also desire and eros as part of this organ that we're calling soul. It's an organ of perception and an organ of desire.

So that's a fairly succinct definition, but it leaves quite a lot of room for growth, for different ideas and vantage points and angles on it.

So, for example, we can definitely conceive of my soul—that in me, if you like, that organ in me which senses in ways that open up soul-making and that wants to sense in those ways. Or we can talk about the soul. We could talk about a world soul or a cosmic soul that's operating in me or through me. There's different logoi, different ideas about whose soul is it, what's actually happening here.

Or sometimes, again, just to touch on dyad practice—and you might have experienced this either with practicing with a dyad or in a group soul-making practice—then actually there feels to be a kind of, if you like, soul of the dyad. And it's both independent and dependent of the two people that make up that dyad, or the people that make up that group. And this dyadic soul, if you like, is kind of a third. If you like, there's me, and this person I'm in the dyad with, and there's a third that seems to encompass us, but it's sort of separate, and sort of includes us, and we sort of include it—but that's where the soul is.

And again, we are, perhaps, as members of the dyad, constituent parts of that soul.

So there are different logoi—different conceptual frameworks—that we can bring to bear on how we're conceiving of soul at any time. These will either be opened up through practice, through experience, and also the different logoi, as we kind of take them for a spin a little bit, hold them, entertain them lightly, allow different kinds of experience to open up. So as always, there's a very intimate relationship between

perception, experience, and conception. In this case, I'm drawing attention to how they influence each other. Perception influences conception. Conception influences perception. But actually, the intimacy is even deeper than that.

So we talk about soul, we talk about images. I'm going to speak about images tonight a little bit, but I'm not going to attempt some kind of succinct definition there. Let me offer just a few reminders of what we mean when we say imaginal.

We introduced the term "sensing with soul" as a sort of equivalent term or interchangeable term, but one that reminds us more of the possibilities that images are not necessarily just intra-psychic—something that happens with my eyes closed as some completely private object. So I could be looking at this lamp or this desk or this book, or my body, something that other people would agree is there in a kind of socially agreed upon perception. But the way that I am seeing it, I'm sensing it with soul. It has dimensionality. It has meaningfulness. It has beauty. There's eros toward it. There are all those other elements of the imaginal.

So when we say image, we mean intra-psychic, but also extra-psychic, if you like. I use "sensing with soul" and "imaginal" interchangeably, but the phrase "sensing with soul" serves as a reminder that we're not just talking about private intra-psychic images. We're also talking about perceptions of commonly agreed upon things—objects, situations in the world—which are sensed with soul, sensed in a soul-making way.

I'll leave aside trying to define eros for now. I've done plenty of that in the past. And there's a whole bunch of other terms, but tonight I think we just want to touch on image and imaginal.

Just to say that soul-making dharma also includes, as we've said, much that isn't obviously just image—all kinds of other aspects around that or that create a platform, a basis to allow that. And soul-making, in a way, also happens any time the mind, or the heart, the experience, expands its frontiers in ways that feel meaningful and enriching and deepening. Some of those might not be through images or sensing with soul.

Again, just some reminders, but I think they're somehow worthwhile.

So when we talk about image, mostly I use the word image to mean imaginal image, but I'll qualify that in a moment. When we talk about imaginal practice, despite some of the similarities, I want to really delineate it from shamanism, for example, and from explorations such as energy healing or extrasensory perception. There are overlaps here. The territory is not that cut and dry, but I really feel that it's worth carving out a very specific area that we're calling imaginal practice in differentiation from—despite some of the overlaps—these other areas. Because imaginal practice is quite rare, and it's rarer than those other areas. It's more likely that if we mix these areas of exploration up, the imaginal will be the first one that's lost, the first one that's diluted, and its power and its potential to open up certain doorways and directions gets lost because it's just confused with other idioms and traditions and explorations.

So despite some of the similarities and overlap—and I find these other areas very interesting certainly—I feel I have a duty to make clear what we mean by this particular area called imaginal practice in contradistinction to some of these others.

We're not talking about channeling. Imaginal practice is not channeling, it's not shamanism, it's not energy healing, it's not ESP, it's not seeing ghosts. It's not quite equatable with Buddhist Tantra either. Again, lots of similarities, lots of overlap, but not the same thing.

I'm not saying this imaginal paradigm, the paradigm of the imaginal, soul-making and that whole path is better or worse. I've said all this before; I'm just repeating. It's not necessarily more or less advanced or anything like that, but it's different in significant ways.

Again, if we assume that our soul-making, our imaginal path and practice is the same as any of those other areas, the particular avenues that come with the imaginal—the openings, the creation, discoveries—won't open. Because certain presumptions, whether they're implicit or explicit in the operating logos, in the conception of these other paths, even if I'm not conscious of them, will fabricate experience along different lines, along certain lines and with certain constraints. And in a way, we'll get off on the wrong foot or divert into some other area.

So like we said, there's a lot of overlap in words—soul and image and soul-making—but there are differences, especially in the philosophical view regarding ontology and epistemology and all of that. This imaginal middle way—neither real nor not real—is one of the key differences. And also the fundamental intention of soul-making practice and imaginal practice being what we call the fullness of intention: the intention for soul-making, if you like, above all else, including other intentions for healing and all kinds of other things. But this primary intention for soul-making, or the fullness of intention to include everything but paramount is the intention for soul-making. These are fundamental differences among others.

These are important distinctions. I don't know whether you can sense that this matters or not, but to my mind it matters a great deal and will, as I say, determine or constrain or divert what unfolds and what opens from practice—or doesn't unfold or doesn't open.

Sometimes too, people assume that anything with any kind of seemingly mythical element equates as imaginal. It doesn't in our teaching necessarily. Or that typical archetypes must be imaginal, or limiting the imaginal to some predefined set of typical archetypes. Someone was saying, "I have four imaginal figures: the king, the jester or the trickster, the ascetic or the monk, and the lover." These are obviously very classic kinds of archetypes and tarot card emblems, but almost stereotypes mainly.

But if I do that—if I limit myself to these four, for example, or any other four or five or whatever it is—I'm limiting the whole logos. I'm limiting what I mean by image. I will end up limiting my practice, as conception affects perception. And if the conception, if the logos is limited, it will limit the experience. It will send the experience and the interpretation of experience down certain railway tracks with not much

possibility, or much less possibility, of moving off those particular tracks and into other areas—more open areas, more fertile areas, more multi-directional areas.

So there won't be, in those cases, if I'm limiting my conception of what's involved in imaginal practice, the kind of infinite and endless possibilities for eros, psyche, and logos that we talk about when we describe the underlying workings of the soul-making dynamic—this idea of endlessness of possibilities, infinite open-ended possibilities for the soul-making dynamic and the fertility there.

I know I've said it before, but I think it's really, really important. Yes, I have to say, also given my health situation—I'm probably dying soon—it feels very important to me to make sure that all these rich waters of different traditions don't just get mixed. Because in that mixture, something will get lost, and probably the first thing to get lost, being as it is the rarest, I think, and in a way somewhat unique, will be the imaginal paradigm, or what we're calling the imaginal paradigm.

I think it's wonderful to explore all these other territories if one has the capacity and interest. But one can do that and at the same time be really clear about what makes what what. What are the distinctions? What are the differentiations? How does that affect things?

As I said, when we use the word image, mostly it's a slightly lazy shorthand for an imaginal image, and imaginal means all those elements are involved—the whole soul-making dynamic is involved. I'm going to talk a little bit more about it tonight, but we can, if you like, make distinctions.

Sometimes we have an image of a situation, but we believe that image is true or real—really how things really are. We might call that a fixation or a fixated image. To be more precise, I want to delineate three kinds of relationships with images which determine actually whether that image is imaginal or not.

We can have a fixated image. Something happens—a person looks at me in a certain way, I have an image of that person, if you like, a sense of them. We also call it papañca in the Buddhist tradition. So that's one type of image, or image gone down a certain track into fixation. It's become fixated, it's become a real thing. There's not a lot of depth in it. There's not all the elements and the soul-making dynamic and potential there.

There's also the case where something happens and an image forms—let's say this person that looked at me funny and now I think they hate me or whatever it is. There's an image or a story or fantasy that's running in our mind about the whole situation, or about my narrative or my life, or why does this always happen to me, or I'm like this, or that person's like that. But in this case, in the second case, we're mindful of the presence of this image. We're mindful of what it is and what's going on in the mind. And because of the mindfulness, there's just a withdrawal of the credit, if you like, and the credulity of it. We're not believing it so much.

Yes, I notice that the mind is spinning the story, but because of the mindfulness—just simple mindfulness that we've all been trained in—we're aware of what's going on. We're not believing it so much. There's less

identification with it. We're less lost in it and less believing it's true. There's some distance to doubt it or to doubt that it's completely true. So we can call that mindfulness, mindful observation or awareness of an image.

And then there's the third category: what we call imaginal. An image that has become imaginal might have started as papañca. This is really important. So it might have started as papañca, but because of the way we skillfully related to it...

worked with it, it became imaginal and opened up all those beautiful and enriching elements of the imaginal, the nodes of the lattice.

So in that, again, one of the elements is this imaginal middle way. It's neither real nor not real. And that's part of what it means to be imaginal. We naturally sense that. Rather than completely believing it or just completely dismissing it as an irrelevant daydream, just flotsam of the mind, there's this quite wide avenue of the imaginal middle way. And that's one of the characteristics of the imaginal. It's kind of theatre. And because of that, we're less lost in it, less believing it completely flat out.

So when we talk about freedom in relation to what comes up in the mind, certainly when there's mindfulness of an image and mindfulness of that tendency or the stirrings of papañca, there's a certain amount of freeing with respect to that image. But when an image becomes imaginal, there's also freedom, a certain freedom—much deeper, richer freedom in relationship to it. Whereas the mindfulness of an image disempowers the image, mindfulness of papañca disempowers papañca, when there's the kind of mindfulness that's involved in imaginal practice, when an image becomes imaginal, it actually empowers the image. So there's freedom, but the image is empowered, instead of freedom that disempowers the image.

There's also a way that mindfulness of an image in the second category tends to either disempower the image or just cut it, draining it of its life, or just holding it static. Whereas when an image becomes imaginal, it's allowed to be dynamic. And the whole soul-making dynamic with the eros-psyche-logos dynamic is allowed to infuse it and work on it and ferment it and expand it and deepen it and enrich it.

So we could make those distinctions in what we mean when we use the word image. But as I said, mostly when I say the word image, I kind of mean imaginal image—it's just a bit of a mouthful.

We also use the term fantasy at times. So how would we define a fantasy? Again, it's a loose definition. Sometimes I just use the words interchangeably—image and fantasy, imaginal image and fantasy. But in a way, I suppose I think of fantasy as something, an image that is a little bit secondary, if you like, or not so much in the main focus.

Usually when we're talking about imaginal practice, like, "Oh, this image came, this dancing ape," or whatever it is—this image, and that's an object, and so I'm focusing on that object in the practice, and I can decide how much or how little to focus on it. But fantasy is often something that operates more in the

background. It's not the main focus. So fantasies inform our life, inform our sense of our narrative, but also our choices in life.

Where we love deeply, where we are devoted deeply, usually there's a fantasy there. We might not recognize it as a fantasy. In other words, there's this kind of imaginal sense of things and of oneself that's usually operating a little bit in the background until we become aware of it as a kind of image that we call a fantasy image. And sometimes we almost catch these, so to speak, out of the corner of the eye. They're not often deliberate objects of attention unless we really draw attention to them.

So for example, when we gave those talks about fantasies of the path, different fantasies of the path, in a way what we were doing was naming something, addressing it, giving some possibilities, and then lo and behold, people start to become aware of, "Oh, I guess this was the fantasy that was operating, and maybe this one could operate, and this one wants to operate," or whatever it is.

But unless you kind of get imbued with imaginal practice in this whole soulmaking dharma, one doesn't often—certainly in a lot of mainstream psychologies or mainstream Dharma—acknowledge that element, that strand of our soul, of our existence, of our way of sensing life so openly. So once we become more involved in imaginal practice, we start to see and start to sense our whole lives that way and become more aware of the fantasies that are operating.

Okay, so if we're again just reminding ourselves of what we mean by image, imaginal image—it really seems worth repeating. I'm aware I've said it many times, but an image is not necessarily visual. So the word in English tends to connote some visual object usually, but when we use the word, it doesn't necessarily mean something visual. Of course it can, but all the senses are involved, and sometimes we can talk about something imaginable, but we're not even sure what sense it's operating in, which of the six senses it's operating in, or all of them, or none of them, or something else, some intuitive awareness of something.

So I'll try to give some examples. A person—I think I gave this example years ago, but a couple of people have mentioned something similar—just meditating or just on retreat or somewhere else and there's a sense of being kissed on the mouth, but I don't see who's kissing me. And yet the sense of that kiss is sensed with soul. It's pregnant, it's full of all the beauty, the eros, the meaningfulness, all the other elements of the imaginal that we've drawn attention to. So it's coming through the tactile sense, the kinesthetic sense, for example.

Or a person was describing they were doing mettā practice, using the phrases and repeating the phrases, "may I be well, may you be well." And then she felt like her hair was being combed, as if the mettā was sort of stroking her hair. The phrases of the mettā were stroking her hair. So something's happening already with the sense of the mettā there. Something's beginning to ferment, to grow, to expand. And this sense of the mettā stroking her hair, like combing her hair, that then became a kind of image of being attended to by a maid and sort of readied for a banquet, she said. But none of this was visual. So it's just a

sense. It's a sort of idea, but it's a lived, fleshed-out image, some of which is kinesthetic, and some is just a sense of an imaginal scene, if you like, of which one is a part, but it's not visual.

And in this sense of things, her heart is suddenly covered in armour. Numbness of heart had been something she had experienced and was actually concerned about recently. And so here, into the image, comes the sense of armour. And then, in response to that sense of the armour around the heart, the maid's hand came gently to touch the armoured heart. All of this non-visual, as an example. And again, the beauty there, the heart being touched, the emotional resonance, the meaningfulness, the echoing and mirroring of one's life—all these elements present without it being visual. The depth, the dimensionality, all of that.

Some of you might have been on a retreat at Gaia House—I think it might have been the Foundations of Soulmaking Dharma retreat. It might have been on the opening evening. We did an exercise, which I think Catherine and I led together. We were chanting the mantra of the Bodhisattva of Compassion.

Some of you who were actually there may not recall this aspect of it, because at some point we also began milling around the room and coming into contact with each other, and of course in the context of silence and strangers and people you love, it can be quite loaded. So it might have been that the instructions I was giving at the time got a little lost. But I'll explain what I said and why it's relevant to what I'm talking about now—the non-visual aspect.

So we were all chanting and we were milling around. And then I asked, if I remember: whose is this compassion? Whose is it? We introduced the chant with the usual radiating of compassion and care to oneself, to others, and so forth. This mind, this heart, this consciousness has the intention of compassion, of soothing, healing towards others, towards all beings. It's the usual way we would conceive of that—it's my compassion.

But whose is this compassion when we're chanting the mantra? In asking that question—because it's always mine, but with the words of the mantra filling the room, the space of the room in which we move, in which we're standing and moving, is filled with these syllables, with these sacred syllables and chants—whose is it? Supporting a sense of the mystery of it and feeling it kinesthetically, that we're in something here. Something is coming through us. Something is touching us from the outside through the sound, through the energy body.

Then we can begin, or a possibility is that compassion itself can be sensed with soul. It begins to have more dimensionality, more unfathomability. Again, these are some of the nodes, the elements of the imaginal. It becomes—we sense it as more than what we have conventionally and habitually conceived of it, how we have conventionally and habitually viewed it as basically a human quality or intention. It becomes something pertaining to the fabric of the cosmos, something that's coming from another level—the divinity or the Buddha nature of Avalokiteshvara. It's not just mine; it's coming. It has this dimensionality, this depth. It has an unfathomability. It has a mystery. It has beauty.

It's not visual. It's coming through the sound, but the sound itself is enriched and deepened through the imaginal sense that's opened through being sensed with soul. It has autonomy. In other words, again, it's not just me deciding to do the compassion, to generate this compassion. Yes, of course—wonderful. But the syllables themselves, the sacred syllables of the mantra, the energy of compassion has its own autonomy. It has its own intelligence. It has its own will. It has its own presence and its own origin. And grace—it's coming. It's not just me intending it; it's gift. All of this, and it's mystery.

It becomes unfathomable in the sense that however I want to, or however I tend to limit—well, I think I know what compassion means: compassion means something that wants to alleviate suffering, an intention that wants to alleviate suffering. Yes, great, wonderful definition of compassion. But as we start sensing it with soul, the whole definition—again, it's the soft and elastic edges—begins to ferment, to expand, to grow, to deepen, to enrich.

And this is not visual, so it's felt with the body, with the energy body, in relation to the sound, in relation to sounding and hearing sound. It's an aural and bodily sense, not a visual sense. So that would be another example.

notes or people tell me, "Oh, I don't get images" or "I don't see this or that." It may be worth giving a few more examples just to fill out what we mean by image—not so much by definition, but by example.

It's a long story, I suppose, but I used to be a jazz musician, and then I gave up. I was a composer for a while. I gave up playing, and then I became a composer, and then I gave up. I threw myself into the Dharma full-time. But periodically in my life, there are times where I feel grief. I miss music. I miss making music, I miss playing, I miss that whole world. Sometimes what happens is I just get repetitive dreams of practicing guitar or playing guitar, and they just come and won't go away. Sometimes I start playing again and the dreams go away. Then I stop playing and they come back. This has gone on for years and years.

So this was one of those days where I had been practicing a little bit of guitar, just a little bit, and then stopped, and then the dreams resumed. Again, the dukkha that went with that—the grief, or the feeling a little bit torn between wanting to get back into music but having other obligations and other pulls.

I was sitting with that in the morning meditation. It wasn't particularly intense, but I let my mind—or perhaps it was already generating sort of music in my mind—improvised melodies and lines and a picture of a guitar, all with the difficulty of the situation and other factors. But I let myself listen to the music. I let the music play in the mind. There's a kind of looseness and fluidity, and it begins to feel wonderful. It's beautiful and there's something powerful in it.

So again, it's a gradual transition. Something that was actually a bit of a daydream, that actually was involved with some dukkha, begins to take on other dimensions. It begins to grow as I go into what seemed like a daydream and pay attention to it with a bit more respect and reverence.

Then, at a certain point, I get a sense of music as a god—a pitch black, featureless god like black empty space, but somehow with many long waving arms, the way Avalokiteshvara has. But again, it's not visual. I can't explain exactly how I get the sense of those arms. If that aspect of the image—the arms—was prominent at first, it soon faded very much to the background. What became the prominent aspect of the image, and the aspect that was at that time the most soulful, the most soul-making—this instruction to kind of hone in and tune to whatever in an image feels the most soul-making, we'll come back to this.

This god definitely felt masculine somehow, and it felt like he has a claim on me. This god of music has a claim on me, on my soul and my life. In recognizing this claim and surrendering to it, I feel a relief and a kind of understanding. It's like I understand something about my life, about my narrative. My surrender to it feels to me like a feminine mode—I'll put those in inverted commas—as if I'm being taken, I'm taken by this god. There is an awareness that he is greater than me, much more powerful than me, this god, as all gods are.

All that feels very beautiful and blissful in my whole body, and particularly in the lower belly. I understand with it—it's not so much that it has to manifest materially. I don't have to be a musician again. I seem in fact not to be one of those chosen for that fully, or throughout my life at least. But I understand that this god Music—infinite in his possibilities—has a claim on me, almost as if from behind, so to speak, in the sense that it might not be the principal thing I'm directly focusing on or devoted to or attending to or working on. But whatever that principal thing is—Dharma or whatever—there will always be flitting in and out, with more or less intensity, the pull, the claim of this pitch black god.

Again, this teaching of the polydirectional pulls of the different gods and the impossibility of serving them all fully in the literal ways that might seem obvious to us.

So maybe it had just a suggestion of a visual element right at the beginning, but actually the sense of that—you could say what became image—I became image, or the sense of my narrative, myself, my narrative self became imaginal in relationship to this very powerful god of music. It wasn't really visual like that.

There was a time when these kinds of images around music and working with music—and the grief that I sometimes feel about leaving it—would appear quite regularly, and I'm working with it over maybe even a few weeks on and off. But it's quite hard to articulate how one kind of senses that. What sense is it being known through?

The claim of this god is like a kind of light or a shadow cast over my life—but I'm using those words metaphorically. It's from elsewhere, so to speak, permeating my life or like a canopy over it. The redemption, the opening up and the soul-making come in the relationship to it—in the recognizing, acknowledging, surrendering to it, seeing myself, sensing myself with soul, my narrative with soul and all that.

Some days later, there was another experience. I had alluded to it at the beginning of that description—there's a way of listening to music in my mind's eye, or rather my mind's ear. It's not necessarily crystal clear; it might be or it might not be. But then it opens up a realm of music, a cosmic realm, a space of abstract music—an infinitely fecund realm or world that is just music, just continual outpouring of music.

I've touched on this many times in previous retreats, this opening to an imaginal sense of a realm of music. Again, it's not visual here but aural, and even then sometimes the aural begins to fade and becomes even more abstract. Yet it's definitely music, definitely beautiful, and definitely a realm. This can open up a kind of cosmopoiesis in the moment with respect to the sounds that are actually around me—the birds, the wind, even the cars, people's voices. Very beautiful. The sensing with soul spreads to the whole environment.

Following on this series, some months ago I was driving to Gaia House, listening to music in the car. I wasn't particularly into what I was hearing; I found it boring and predictable. But something shifted, and I got a soul sense of my relationship with music—of music's claim on me, its power, its presence in, over, and through my life. I sensed it as refracted. Refraction is when light hits water and deflects, bending rather than following a straight line. Similarly, this music, this presence of music in my life, was refracted—not actual music so much as the image of music refracted or radiating into my life somehow. It was the image of music, not actual music itself.

Instead of feeling that subtle grief or disempowerment, that grieving for the impossibility of actual music in my life right now, there was an empowering emotion—as if this was exactly right, that I have other manifestations to steward, to give and receive right now.

Let me give a couple more examples of non-visual images. I had a dream about a dharma teacher colleague. All I remembered in the morning were fragments: the house where I grew up, something about the sun shining, a student of mine, and this colleague. She said, "You're going to die soon"—or relatively soon—"but you need to take care of your legacy, because there's a powerful possibility here that you need to tend."

Just these dream fragments. In morning meditation, I remembered them, then let them go. After they went, there was an imaginal sense of my dying soon, of not being here, being dead—not being present as a physical presence in the world. So there was a sense of absence. But this absence became a very powerful kind of presence or force in the world.

Again, there's no visual object at all. It's actually an absence, yet that absence had this imaginal sense to it. It was full of the elements—the neither real nor not real, the beauty, the infinite echoing and mirroring. For this to be imaginable in that moment, it had to connect with a recent decision and intention I'd made to study certain areas, including ethics in relation to soul and the nature of matter. Somehow that intention, that channeling of my will and energies, felt powerful in itself, but it fused with and

impregnated with life force and direction that imaginal absence that comes from death. Again, not a visual image at all—very hard to articulate.

Here's another, quite recent—perhaps six weeks ago. I was being driven to the doctor on a sunny early spring day. I had my eyes open in the car when an image came of my chest opening as if it were a cupboard with two doors. But in the imaginal sense, it was more like what's called in Jewish tradition the ark, the Aron HaKodesh—a holy receptacle, a cupboard where they keep the Torah scrolls.

It was as if my chest was opening like that. I'm not sure it was really visual—more a kinesthetic sense with this association. It felt very open and blessed, with vague traces of the sense of my body as sacred text, like the Torah scroll. This is perhaps more idea than visual image, but it combined with a sense of straddling two worlds—the world of life and the world of death. I'm not even sure what I mean by that exactly. A sense of different planes of existence, of this plane of obvious material manifestation being just one among other dimensions that perhaps have a different...

cast a different light on death.

So there was a sense of myself then, with this probability of dying in the near future, straddling these two worlds, being somehow in both worlds at once—the world of life and the world of death. And with that straddling, tremendous softness and surrender and letting go and peace increased. The gaze, the way that I saw the world around me and the situation—the fields and the trees and the sky—was infused with so much sense of mercy and compassion and beauty.

It felt in that moment that all and any kind of gross level of clinging to life was gone. So it was really a sense of blessedness and peace. And it also felt like blessings poured forth from my being, from my chest, from my eyes. Something very, very lovely.

So those were two aspects: the opening of the chest and the sort of sacred text, the place of the holy scrolls; the straddling of life and death with all the peace and beauty that gave to the sense of things, all things.

And then the third aspect was a kind of immediate cosmopoiesis. Right then, the sense of the land that we were driving through was perceived as having its own intelligence, its own life in a way which I don't think I'd experienced before. So something quite new. Again, very hard to pinpoint. This land has intelligence—something I've touched on before, but the particular experience there was quite new.

All three of those aspects opened simultaneously, actually, were experienced together. I had maybe touched on each of them individually in the weeks before in practice, formal or informal, but they came together then. The eyes were open, the land was sensed with soul, the sense of death and my life and narrative—they're all equally important integrated aspects of that image.

I don't know whether we'd call that an intra-psychic image or not, but partly I want to say that it's not visual, and partly I want to give a sense of how images can actually become quite complex constellations

in very lovely ways, fusing together different aspects.

Okay, last example of something not visual: sitting in meditation and letting my body sense lead with the whole energy body and that awareness, letting that guide the practice and guide me. And I sense in the meditation then that I'm being tended to lovingly by angels. Tender presences—they feel very feminine, but it's not visual. So it's just something that feels feminine there.

I'm not seeing them, I'm feeling something, I'm sensing something, but I can't exactly tell you what sense it's coming through. It's probably more kinesthetic than anything else, but even that is quite vague. The sensual detail is not clear, not sharp, not distinct, but the imaginal sense is very strong. This is what's happening: tender, loving angels are ministering to me. It feels very beautiful and very delightful.

It's not clear whether they are tending my corpse after my death—this sort of transition to death—or whether they're healing my still living body. Something about that uncertainty, is it this or is it that? Is it healing, or is it actually a sort of image of the profound tending and ministering to a corpse that's been through the trials and tribulations and wearing difficulties of life and illness, and now receives these loving, tender, angelic ministrations after death?

That uncertainty, is it this or that? It seemed somehow necessary to it. The answer wasn't forthcoming. It seemed like it wasn't right to ask, so I let it go and just opened to the ministration. So much love there, so much love.

Again, a sense—perhaps at this point becoming slightly visual, but not predominantly visual—of water being poured on me, like anointed or bathed, again with tenderness, with blessing, my body being stroked, water poured on my head.

So those are some examples of images that are not visual. And just to labor the point and to open up in case some people are still stuck on demanding visual objects in their imaginal practice—if we again just linger a little bit, what do we mean by imaginal? I'm just filling out some things, not everything, just a few things tonight.

Obviously we can have image as other, like I said—here's this dancing ape I am looking at, or seeing this dancing ape, this image. So the image is an object there. But also the self can become image. And that will happen anyway, as we've talked about. I want to go into that in a little more detail in this series of talks—how the self can and should get involved in the imaginal sense and become itself imaginal. But it could be that the primary image is the self, or it takes place here as opposed to an object seemingly over there in the psychic space.

So, for example, I was sitting in meditation, and there were many things that had happened in the last few days—a lot of emotional resonances and stirrings still present in the heart from all these different events. Suddenly, out of the heart center or the solar plexus center, came this image of a bare-branched tree, like a tree in winter, almost black. It grew out of my chest, and suddenly it burst into blossom—beautiful,

radiant blossom. I was that tree, or rather that tree was in the place of my body. The image there is the self becoming image, and the location in psychic space is here. My body has become the image, as opposed to being an object over there that I'm looking at. Both are possible.

Another crucial element we've touched on is this node of create-discover. Images are created-discovered. One of the implications of this element is that it's actually okay if you deliberately invoke an image or deliberately change an image or deliberately bring back an image that touched you before in another time. That's deliberate creation, yet it's potentially just as valid as an image that comes completely out of the blue, unbeckoned and fresh, where it seems I did nothing to create it.

We tend to think that if I made it happen, or if I deliberately change an image, it has to be ego—and ego is something other than the unconscious, something other than soul. I don't buy into that distinction. I would rather say either way is okay, whether an image comes unbidden and surprisingly, seeming like pure grace, or whether it seems like something I've generated, or even following a guided meditation, or resurrecting an image, revisiting an image, re-invoking an image I've had before.

What matters, rather than who made this, is: Is it soul-making? If it feels soul-making, it doesn't matter that I've made it, that I've created it, that I just added something to that image or took something away or changed it. What matters is the sense of soul-making. Even if an image comes completely unbidden with all the mythical qualifications—"Oh, this must be an image"—if it doesn't feel soul-making, it's not, in our language, imaginal yet.

What matters is the soul-making sense. That's one of the nodes as well, because soul-making is what makes something imaginal. This is what we should use to guide us: Are we on the right track? This is also part of how we support an image to become more imaginal and to deepen—by tuning in to what actually feels soulful, what are the soul-making aspects of this image. An image is a complex thing. What parts or dimensions of the image actually feel soulful? That's what we should gently tune into, linger with, feel, explore. So this notion that "I shouldn't make something happen because that's ego"—I wouldn't put too much stock in that.

A couple of last things for tonight. When we talk about the nodes or the elements of the imaginal—or can we call them aspects of the imaginal, aspects of the lattice—at times we've used those three words: nodes, elements, and aspects. When we talk about them, it's not that we're discussing something that operates purely as on-off switches, though they are sometimes that. A node suddenly fires. Suddenly there's a sense of divinity, or suddenly the eros is there. Like an on-off switch or on-off setting.

But sometimes they're more like each node itself, each element itself, is more like a spectrum or more like a dimmer switch. When it's an on-off switch, it can feel much more passive—something that just happened, something that happened to me, suddenly something ignited. This switch just got flipped into the on position. When it's a dimmer switch, there's actually the possibility of our intention turning the dial, turning the dimmer switch. Or if we use the analogy we've employed of fire—this flame igniting

another flame.

A flame can also have variable intensity—you can turn the gas higher or lower, add more wood to the fire. Fire is not merely on or off; it too has a dimmer switch quality.

It's helpful to envision the model of sudden sparking—a sudden ignition of one node that, in its sudden sparking, triggers or ignites the sudden sparking of other nodes or elements. This model conveys something of the quantum leap quality that can often occur in imaginal practice, whether practicing alone or with another.

At other times, however, the experience of individual nodes feels more like dials or faders. We can turn any one of them up by simply noticing it, paying attention to that node. This noticing itself—this kind of delicate attention without pressure—actually begins to either ignite it or turn it up, amplifying that element in the experience. Then perhaps the whole lattice, the other nodes, gradually turn up, or they may suddenly ignite once a certain threshold has been reached with the first element. There are many possibilities here.

With practice—gradually, with the development of skill and art in this alchemy of imaginal practice—we may be able to guide the relative balance of the settings of any two or even more of these dials, these elements. For example, attention to the energy body is an element that might remain as background awareness. We can turn up that dial and become more immersed in the sense of the energy body. Perhaps it becomes very pleasant in a certain way and takes us into jhāna, while the image as object relatively recedes into the background.

We can begin to alter the relative balance of these different dials, these different flames. With emotion, it might come to the fore or fade; the sense of real or not-real can come to prominence, or we can bring it forward by turning up these dials through our noticing or through tweaking them in certain ways.

This takes practice and usually time to develop such skill. It's somewhat similar to how I would teach insight practice in relationship to samādhi. We might be practicing certain insight ways of looking, and because they bring letting go and ease in the energy body—a relative unbinding of clinging and the knots in the energy body—that starts to feel quite nice. We can lean a little more into the awareness and enjoyment of that pleasant feeling in the energy body, taking us in the direction of samādhi, giving less priority to the insight at that point. We can play with any kind of relative balance between the insight way of looking and the samādhi.

The metaphor I've used previously is of a hawk or any bird of prey riding thermal air currents. When they change direction, it's a very subtle inclining of the wings this way or that—even just a part of the wings—and it takes them in a different direction. It's as if they're picking up opportunistically on currents already there. We pick up on currents already present—flames, thermals, if you like—that are already there in imaginal practice or in insight-samādhi practice. With just the subtlest realignment through

attention, we change the direction of practice.

I wanted to be clear about what we mean by "imaginal" by explaining the elements, the twenty-eight factors and so forth. But it's also important to recognize that it's not so black and white. We can speak of something becoming more fully imaginal or more authentically imaginal. Again, there's a spectrum here—from, say, fantasy on one side, through something having more and more of these elements, a richer and deeper involvement of each element, becoming more and more fully imaginal.

Partly this describes the unfolding experience itself, but I also say this for pedagogical reasons. Some people hear these teachings and think, "I don't know, maybe I've never had an imaginal experience." Another kind of person, or the same person at a different time, might automatically assume that any image they have is imaginal in the sense we're meaning.

So much about teaching is contextual and relative to each student or each student at a certain time. There's this middle way where we recognize a spectrum, where we can talk about becoming more fully imaginal. This means: don't necessarily believe, if you have a tendency to think, "I don't know what Rob and Catherine are talking about. I don't think I've ever had such an experience. I probably never will. I don't know this and I can't do that," and so on. Trust that you're on a spectrum and you can grow. The experiences can grow; the explorations can develop more and more into what we call the fully or authentically imaginal.

For the other kind of person, these teachings about the nodes might be important to say: hold on, if you think something's imaginal, just check—does it have all these other factors, all these other elements? Because that's what we mean. What you're calling imaginal may not actually be fully what we mean yet, or what's possible in the directions we're discussing.

It's tricky as a teacher, obviously tricky as a student, but thinking of it as a spectrum is helpful in all kinds of ways.

There's a saying from the Dzogchen tradition: "Trust your experience, but keep refining your view." In the Dzogchen tradition, this relates to the view of Dzogchen or a certain emptiness view. Trust your experience, but keep refining your view. There's so much wisdom in that.

This goes for imaginal practice, it goes also for emptiness practices. We have certain experiences, a certain level of insight, and it may well be—it often is—that they can be deepened. That level of understanding or insight, that level of experience, if you like, can be deepened and enriched. So I'm not throwing out my experiences of images or imagination. I'm trusting that, but I keep refining my view. What else is there? What's different here? What might I not be seeing? What's possible? What are some of these other elements that I maybe haven't experienced or incorporated or understood yet? So trust your experience and keep refining your view.

I'm also reminded of Ajahn Chah talking one time. He said, you know, as a teacher, I'm like someone

walking beside my students as they walk down the road, and there are ditches on each side of the road—trenches on each side of the road. And if I see a student veering too much to the left and in danger of falling in that ditch, I say, "Go right, go right, move to the right." And if that same student or another student looks like at a certain time they're in danger of falling into the ditch on the right-hand side of the road, then I say, "Go left, go left." So teaching is always contextual. It's always relative to the student, where they are at that time, what their mindset and patterns of psychology are—all of that. So each individual at any time needs a slightly different emphasis.

One of my teachers, Ajahn Jeff, Ajahn Ṭhānissaro, when I studied jhānas with him many years ago, said—I'm pretty sure he said, "You know, if you think you've had an experience and you think, 'Oh, that's the first jhāna' or 'that's the third jhāna' or whatever it is, just put post-it notes on it for a while"—those post-it notes, those sticky labels. Because then what will happen is your experience will mature and it will change. So if you've had an experience of what you think was the first jhāna, you go, "Oh, that must be the first jhāna." But as you practice more with that state, it starts to change through practice. It refines. It matures. It grows. It starts to differentiate. "Oh, actually, that was two states, and I got them mixed up, and that one's that, and that one's that," as well as the experience itself changing. We could talk a lot in terms of jhānas—I won't talk about that now.

But I think there'd be some wisdom in saying something very similar for imaginal practice. Think, "Oh, this is imaginal" or "that wasn't imaginal." Just put a post-it note on it. Just be light with the labeling or the "have I achieved this or that." It's a real kindness and it allows things to grow as you grow into discovering more of what's involved and what we mean by imaginal.

The last thing to say right now is that all of the elements of the imaginal—so all of those twenty-eight elements that we've listed and outlined and talked about elsewhere—they all have, as I alluded to briefly before, soft and elastic edges. Each of them is unfathomably deep and infinitely developable. Each of them are created, discovered. So, again, what that means is humility or divinity or dimensionality or beauty, etc. Each of these might mean something to us at this point in time in our life and our practice. But because they have soft and elastic edges, they can be stretched. What does beauty mean? What does it encompass? What does divinity mean and encompass? What does humility mean and encompass? It can get stretched. Its meaning can get expanded, deepened, enriched, become itself multi-dimensional, multi-aspected.

As I alluded to right at the beginning tonight, things that are both foundations or roots or elements of imaginal practice themselves become ensouled, and we go on a journey with that, or they expand and teach us. They are unfathomably deep. We never come to the end of what humility means, certainly never come to the end of what divinity might mean, or beauty. And infinitely developable. And we're involved in that. So this is all part of, I think, what we need to bear in mind as we walk this path of soul-making dharma and practice.

Just helping in the sense of offering clarity and cultivating the right attitude. What kind of attitude

nourishes the practice? What gives it space to grow, provides it with good soil so that it can be truly fertile?

This is the soil we seek to cultivate—one that allows our imaginal practice to flourish, one that honors the infinite depths we're exploring. When we approach this work with the right understanding and the proper attitude, we create conditions where the soul can unfold its mysteries, where the imaginal can reveal its teachings, where the journey of soul-making can proceed with grace and wisdom.

The path we walk is both ancient and ever-new, both grounded in timeless wisdom and responsive to the unique calling of our individual souls. It asks of us patience and passion, humility and courage, discernment and openness. It invites us into relationship—with the images that arise, with the depths of our being, with the sacred dimensions of existence that surround and interpenetrate our lives.

May this exploration serve not only our own awakening but the awakening of all beings. May the images we tend, the souls we nurture, the divinity we recognize contribute to the healing and transformation our world so desperately needs.

Thank you for listening, and for your willingness to engage with these profound territories of practice and understanding.

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