The Crucible

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If you've had experiences of images that have affected you deeply, if you've had experiences of sensing with soul, then you'll recognize that using a term or describing it as a kind of alchemy is appropriate. There's a kind of transubstantiation of the sense of ourselves, of others, other human beings, of the world, of nature, of bodies, of matter. All these aspects of our existence and all these realms of perception are transubstantiated through the process, which of course is central to what alchemy is or was.

And so if we talk in those terms—the art of the alchemy of imaginal practice—then we can perhaps look into analogies of the alchemical vessel and the different processes. A kind of crucible is needed, or some kind of vessel. Actually, there are different kinds of vessels in alchemy. I don't want to stretch that analogy too far—there's a breakdown pretty quickly, probably.

Or we could talk about, if we're asking what is it that opens up the world of images? What is it that opens up the world to being sensed with soul? Using another analogy of birth: what kind of womb, what's involved in the gestation of those kinds of perceptions, those kinds of images, what's involved in caring for the birth and then caring for the tending to the image or the sense or the perception or the soul-making transformation that comes?

So we could use either of those metaphors, analogies—either the alchemy or the birth from a womb. But again, I don't want to stretch them too far. I want to say some preliminary things today that I hope will be helpful and then get into more detail about some of the aspects of skill and art in these practices.

One of the pieces that I really want to return to and emphasize is the importance of the relationship to our emotions. This relationship has to be within a certain range. If I dismiss my emotions, if I bypass them, if I deconstruct them, if I zap them with some emptiness way of looking, atomize them or whatever it is, spiritualize them away, then the crucible cannot heat up enough to ferment and to catalyze the alchemical process.

If, on the other hand, I'm just lost in an emotion without mindfulness, without any sense of a skillful relationship to that emotion, then that also will not be helpful. The alchemical process, the gestation, won't be served, won't be permitted, or is very unlikely. So part of that emotional relationship—I'm going to come back to this in detail, but it's a really important point—part of that range of helpful relationship to emotions that allows imaginal practice and sensing with soul has to do with sensing in the energy body. We've talked about this, and the energy body involves more than just emotions, but this is really important.

As I said, I'll return to it in later talks, but let me say a few things about that and about what are the conditions that support the birth of images, the reception of images?

In relation to emotions, actually someone a little while ago on retreat, who'd done quite a lot of imaginal practice and was really in his element there, asked me a question in an interview. He came in and reported that some images recently come and seem to last just a few seconds or a minute or two. "I can see that all the elements are there, all the nodes of the lattice are there," he said. "And they have a big effect, but then they're gone. Whereas it used to be that images would stay and I would be with them for one or two hours or more, the same image." He asked, "Is this just a natural change as imaginal practice develops, that images get shorter in duration?"

I thought, hmm, that's interesting. I don't actually know. But I don't think it's necessarily just a natural change as imaginal practice develops. What occurred to me were two factors that might be relevant there.

It may be that when there is not a sustained emotional challenge in one's life—for example, some kind of relationship crisis or even a marriage crisis, some long-term dukkha, a really challenging illness, or working on a project that's really stretching and challenging you in certain ways—it may be that when there is not a sustained emotional challenge in one's life, maybe the images don't actually need to last a long time. Let's put "need" in inverted commas. Images don't "need" to last a long time.

The emotional energy that is present is part of what gives birth to and sustains an image. We relate to those images emotionally, out of those emotions, and out of those emotions if we relate to that emotion in the right way. We don't need to be with them a long time necessarily. Some of them just do last a long time, some less, but it might be the ones that last longer are coming partly—or that duration is coming partly—out of the emotional ferment that's there, in something that's really challenging emotionally.

An exception might be the kind of beautiful cosmopoiesis that we experience when an imaginal sense spreads to the whole world, or to one's whole environment. There's a sensing the soul of one's whole environment, not just of one object, intrapsychic or extrapsychic. Or it could be one object sensing the soul—extrapsychic object sensing the soul.

But there, you know, for instance, the garden becomes a Daedalian realm, an angelic realm or something like that. Many of you have experienced that kind of thing. And that can be sustained from or with a kind of emotional well-being, some kind of quasi-jhanic state or well-being. And that is the emotion, so to speak, that's sustaining, that's part of sustaining, if we use that language, that perception.

So that was one reflection that occurred to me.

The second is, and again, it's something we'll come back to, but an image needs us to tune to whatever are its most soul-making aspects. So sometimes we get hung up on the visual and the clarity of the visual, or we're demanding some visual clarity or something like that. But that may not be at all what's most soul-making, really where the juice is, where the life of the image is and the vitality of the image is. But if

we don't tune to what is most soul-making—and there's not a formula for what is obviously most soul-making; I have to intuit that, feel it, sense it in the moment without a formula—so my antennae have to be up, I have to be receptive and sensitive. But if we don't tune to what is soul-making, if we're actually focusing on something else, some other aspect of the image, the image will lose its energy and its cohesion and, for instance, the mind gets distracted.

So emotions have a part. They're an integral part of imaginal practice and sensing the soul.

We could say, and I can't remember if someone suggested or asked, you know, is vulnerability one of the nodes, perhaps? Is it, for instance, a 29th node? So that, to me, is a really interesting question. Of course, we could put it there, absolutely. The elements are not rigid dogmas, or they're not engraved in stone on tablets. But let's explore a little bit this notion of vulnerability.

Vulnerability actually means, from the Latin vulnera, as a wound, as vulnerability able to be wounded. It's sensitivity, if you like, but also it's more than sensitivity. It's this capacity to be wounded. A vulnerable wound can also be an incision, which is also kind of opening. You know, when there's a cut in the body, there's a kind of opening there. But let's ponder this a little bit, vulnerability.

So some people might be nervous with respect to imaginal practice and believe or fear, be concerned that they're vulnerable to some kind of possession by an image or a kind of loss of control or loss of their autonomy. I do not think that is a real possibility, a real vulnerability of soul-making and imaginal practice. In other words, I don't think that's at all likely to happen. I've never come across it. It might happen in other circumstances, but not the way we're teaching imaginal practice.

A person might, however, carry that fear of being possessed as a sort of habitual pattern of expectation and behavior. And they might carry that into any relationships—fear of being taken over, of being dominated, of losing one's autonomy. Any relationship, human or imaginal, a person might have that concern or notice that pattern, actually do lose my autonomy or seem to. And that fear, if it's there, will hinder the soul-making. It will actually block the soul-making dynamic, the eros, psyche, logos dynamic, from expanding and deepening, widening, getting richer, more complicated.

Or one might have, for example, a tendency towards merging with another, and in that way kind of, not so much being possessed, but something like that. Or withdrawing—the opposite is sometimes what psychologists call a schizoid tendency, to withdraw, to split, to kind of hide back in oneself, so to speak, or even behind oneself. Or alternate those. There might be a pattern of I do this and then I withdraw. I merge and then I withdraw and I don't seem to have any control over that.

Either of these tendencies, the merging or the withdrawing, will prevent eros in our terms. It will block the eros. The merging, why? Because we've said the eros needs two. And when we merge, we've lost the two. And the withdrawing loses the vitality of the connection, the libido, the juices cannot flow between self and a potential imaginal object or a beloved other or whatever it is.

So a person might be carrying those patterns or those fears and they will have an effect, but in itself I don't think imaginal practice and sensing the soul has to it. If there are those fears or that one recognises I do have these patterns in any relationship—not just in a relationship with an imaginal object—then that's where we can train a little bit. That's why we've been doing those two-ness exercises or what we call sometimes the balance of attention either way. Actually, what is it to be with another? Whether that other is something from the natural world, whether it's a human other, whether it's an intra-psychic image, what is it to be in relationship with another where there's the two-ness that is connected and alive, that the eros can flow without collapsing into one, without emerging, without losing myself in the other, or without a withdrawing?

And so one can practice that, and I'll hopefully return to that a little bit in the series of these talks, how we can kind of fill out that practice a little bit.

Again, talking then about fundamentals, basics, or potentially roots of soul-making practice. There might be a kind...

I mean, actually, there certainly is a vulnerability to craving taking over, or something that starts as eros—some relationship which feels full of eros—and then that eros becomes craving at any point if we're not caring for it, if we're not tending to it well.

The expansion and the opening, the life-giving and dimensionalizing that eros supports, allows, and engenders, collapses when the eros collapses to become craving. And that's a definite vulnerability. Of course, craving is dukkha, is painful. So there's a kind of vulnerability to the wound of dukkha, of craving, at any point.

The good news is that all this is quite labile and quite amenable to our input, our responses, our careful guiding. We might be working with another human being in a dyad, we might be working with an imaginal object, we might be working with a human being who's not present for us but who has become imaginal. There's a lot of eros, and then that becomes craving—but it's very possible to reopen that craving so that it becomes eros again. So yes, there's a vulnerability there, absolutely, but it's not anything that one cannot, as one develops the art of practice, learn how to respond to skillfully and get back on track.

I suppose there's a vulnerability too with sensing the soul, with working with images. There's a vulnerability to my duty to an image, to the sense of duty that I might have to an image or to a sense of things when I sense with soul. Partly for a number of reasons, but one of the reasons is because that duty that comes from an image or a perception—a sense of something or things that has really touched us deeply in the soul—that sense of duty often wants to be seen by others. It wants to be expressed in the world and seen by others. Again, this is something I'm going to return to. And it wants to be valued.

Of course, that's dangerous territory, because it might be that we are blocked in one way or another,

internally or externally, and not able to express it in the world. It's not seen by others. Or it is seen—we have expressed it, it is seen—but it's not valued by other human beings.

That's a vulnerability, and that vulnerability can never be entirely under my control or predictable. I cannot guarantee that what I find valuable and what I'm loyal to, a loyal servant of, in terms of discharging my duty from the imaginal sense, I cannot guarantee that will be received well, noticed, paid attention to, valued by others in the world. There's, of course, plenty of instances through history where people have done that and it hasn't been valued. Perhaps the value comes a hundred years after the person dies. Van Gogh—there are countless examples.

But there is that vulnerability. The duty is a kind of vulnerability, it's a burden, it's not a guaranteed success. We might have the pain of some kind of failure, the pain of some kind of incompleteness of human connection and a frustration of the soul's desire to be seen. Again, I'll return to this. This is quite important, and it's quite contrary to a lot of popular psychologies that would just put such things in the category of delusion. Of course, there is a danger of over-reification, or put them in the categories of ego: "Oh, why do you want to be seen? Why do you want to make such an impression on people?" We'll come back to this in later talks.

Sometimes, if we talk about vulnerability in relation to imaginal practice, I don't know that it will ever be that an image comes or a sensing with soul is there, and in that moment the very perception of the image blows us away in the sense that it's actually more than our circuits can handle. Sometimes it's the case that the eros can feel more than we can handle, but I've talked about how to work with that skillfully, and that's a really important part of the art: how to handle a lot of charge, how to develop one's capacity and skill handling eros so that it stays productive and doesn't shrink into craving and doesn't just feel too much energetically to tolerate.

I don't know that the emotional impact of an image can actually be—I doubt that we're ever given more than we can actually handle in the moment. But sometimes the duty aspect may seem to us to be more than we can handle, more than we can take on or do. We're asked to do something that feels really at the edge of our capacity or capabilities. It may seem that way.

I was thinking about Mary, Jesus' mother, at the Annunciation when the angel Gabriel came and announced to her that she was pregnant, pregnant with divine life. In the first chapter of Luke, if I remember—probably in the other Gospels as well—she responds to the angel Gabriel when he comes to announce this at the Annunciation. She says, "I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said." It's beautiful, the humility, the openness, the willingness, the surrender there. "I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said." And then the duty that she has as a mother...

Her duty as a mother was not easy at all. They had to flee from where they were living and escape Herod's persecution of newborn infants and his murdering of them. Her son Jesus, as you may know from reading between the lines in the Gospel, was regarded as a bastard. There was uncertainty about who his father

was. Was Joseph actually his father? Don't think so. And of course, in that time and culture, this carried a huge negative stigma. To be a bastard, not to have a father, not to know who one's father was—Mary, as well as Jesus, had to deal with that. That was part of her duty in raising a son who was regarded in the community as a bastard and ostracized for it. And then, of course, Jesus is put to death and crucified, with Mary at the foot of the cross, losing her son. So the duty that she assented to, that she opened herself to—"may it be to me as you have said"—came at a cost, really stretching her in human terms.

We can also turn this around, though, this question of vulnerability in this story of the Annunciation from the Gospel. With all these things, the Bible and all that, can we hear it with a kind of imaginal poetic sensibility and allow its dimensions to open up for us instead of just regarding it, reading it completely flatly? Because of course, when heard that way, it just sounds ridiculous to our modern sensibilities and assumptions.

What if we hear it imaginatively? What if we bring our imaginal sensibility, our poetic sensibility, our religious sensibility, and all the openness that this means for the heart, for the soul, for the being? All the hermeneutic, the interpretive, the infinite interpretive possibilities that such stories open up—they really become, when we relate to them as images, unfathomable. They take on those nodes, they become unfathomably deep, unfathomably always harboring more possibilities for interpretation, for touching us, for angles of perspective on that story.

If we read and listen this way to this beautiful passage from the Gospels, you can also say that actually, God is vulnerable here. It's not just Mary who's vulnerable—God is vulnerable here. Because Mary may say no: "I don't want this child. I'm going to have an abortion. I don't like it. What will people think?" Perhaps that's why, from a certain angle, her words in response to the angel Gabriel's Annunciation are recorded. It's not just her humility, but God's dependence on her assent and her attitude and her relationship and the beauty of that.

God depends on human assent, human perception and human action. We've touched on this in a number of talks over recent years. There's a Zoharic teaching of how we create God, how God needs us, how somehow our perceptions, our intentions, our actions, our thoughts, our conceptions are part of allowing, supporting and engendering a harmony in the Godhead. And even further, sometimes it's as if we create God through our attitudes, perceptions, conceptions, acts.

There's also that puzzling passage in the Old Testament where Jacob, as he's traveling on a journey, encounters an angel in the night. Jacob wrestles all night with the angel, and he wins. Jacob wins, but he's wounded. And he carries a wound—the angel wounds his thigh. The vulnerability, the wound, the capacity to be wounded again.

What would happen if we read that and sensed into those kinds of stories imaginatively? If we don't hurry through that story of Jacob and just fill out a couple of other elements that are relevant and resonant to our paradigm of soul-making and sensing the soul and imaginal practice and this issue of

vulnerability—the angel and Jacob, and sometimes it refers to the angel as God. So it's either an angel or God or the angel is the face of God. They wrestle all night, and in a way, the angel couldn't completely overpower Jacob, but wounds him at the hip and thigh, and also blesses him.

Those two go together in that story—the blessing from the angel, the blessing from the divine, and the wound go together. The angel then, in blessing him, gives Jacob a new name. He gives him the name Yisrael. There are different interpretations of what Yisrael means, what Israel means. Philo, the ancient Jewish Platonic philosopher, interpreted the meaning of Yisrael—El is God, Yisrael is "he who sees God," one who sees the divine. Corbin, Henry Corbin, also follows that interpretation for the meaning of Yisrael.

So this angel and Jacob, they wrestle all night. In leaving, the angel wounds Jacob at the hip and blesses him at the same time. And in blessing him, gives him a new name—one who sees the divine.

Again, what happens if we hear such a story with our poetic sensibility, our imaginal sensibility?

We could say that vulnerability is an opening to the imaginal in certain ways. Certainly sensitivity is indispensable as part of imaginal practice and sensing the soul. We need to be able to be impacted, and we need to be able to develop our subtlety of sensitivity.

Sometimes what can happen—if we talk again about the vessel or the gestation of images—is that something touches us in life: some sense or perception of things, or even physical touch. At the time we register it and interact with it or whatever. But later on, maybe a little while later, or sometimes even months later, the memory of it becomes image. This can happen in all kinds of ways and through any of the sense doors.

Sometimes it can happen, for instance, with sex. There's some kind of sexual lovemaking or interaction with someone, and at the time maybe it's enjoyable and lovely and wonderful. But sometimes later, something in the soul is metabolizing or digesting that experience, and the memory of it becomes image—the memory of that touch, the memory of that kiss, the memory of that togetherness.

There's no reason why whatever that was can't be sensed with soul right then in the moment, during that touch or that event. But sometimes there are other things going on in the heat or the complexity of the moment, or the difficulty of the moment. All kinds of other considerations and factors prevent it from being sensed with soul in that moment. But later it can come back and be very beautiful, very fertile, very powerful image.

Someone shared with me a very beautiful story—I asked her permission to share it. It's not sexual, but it illustrates the same principle of a memory becoming an image.

This person's father was in a coma in a hospital in another country. He was in a coma for a long time—two months or more—and she went there and got an apartment near the hospital. Every day she was basically living in the hospital, and maybe sleeping in the apartment, or sometimes sleeping in the hospital.

Eventually, after a few months, he came out of the coma. She didn't know—and I didn't know either—that when you come out of a coma, it's a very gradual process. It's not just suddenly you wake up and everything's how it was. It's a really slow process of regaining your faculties, and they control that gradual emergence with drugs and other interventions.

So he was coming out of the coma very gradually. He couldn't speak at first. He had a tube in his throat, and his arms were tied down in the bed—part of this controlled emergence from the coma that they try to guide.

One evening she was washing up, getting ready to leave him for the night. With his arms tied down in the bed, he beckoned her over with the minimal motion that his wrists were capable of—repeatedly making a gesture: come over.

She was about to go, but she went and put her head close to him to see what he wanted. When she did that, he kissed her on the forehead. And that was it.

She was recounting the whole trip to that city and hospital. It was very stressful dealing with the hospital and the family and the apartment where she had to scramble to get a place—it had lots of problems. She was completely exhausted when she got back home. The whole memory, the whole trip was just very difficult—a whole difficult period that she got through.

Then, really some months later, she was doing walking meditation at Gaia House. The memory of that kiss to her forehead suddenly came as a primarily kinesthetic memory—not necessarily visual. She kind of felt it on her forehead again.

In that moment, months later, she said it felt like a kiss of blessing from God. This gentle, loving...

blessing, probably grateful kiss from a father to his daughter. And so she calls the image God's kiss. And with it, that kiss, a grace that opened a door to a whole other sense of the whole time, the whole period, that whole stretch of months just had a whole other sense to it. So much meaningfulness, so much beauty there, a completely different view moved her to tears.

And just to be clear here, in becoming for her the memory of that kiss, in becoming for her God's kiss, as she called it, it's not then in that image divorced from the father's kiss. It's the father's kiss still, but it's gaining the dimensionality of the divine. It's not now something other, and the father's kiss is forgotten. There is a growth, an extension, an enriching, a complexifying, a dimensionalizing of the original experience and of the memory and of that event.

So, if we talk about gestation, there's also this possibility, and again, some of you will recognize this kind of thing from your experience: there's also the possibility of something happening in life, something impacting us, and at the time we don't even recognize the impact, or it actually doesn't have the impact, it doesn't seem to have the impact at the time. A little while later, it's the memory of that exchange, event,

touch, whatever it is, that sense, impact comes back and it becomes imaginal.

And sometimes that can even be—images can come from life, like I've just described, also from art. And again, it might not be in the moment that something in a book or a movie feels like it's imaginal and impactful at that level. But something goes into the soul, the soul metabolizes it, digests it, and makes image of it. It creates, discovers image, imaginal image from this thing.

So I remember I saw this movie. I don't know if some of you have seen it. I saw actually, I don't know if it was the second half or some portion. I definitely missed a big chunk of the beginning. So I couldn't quite figure out what on earth was going on, but it might have also been just that kind of movie. It was called, I think it was called Cowboys and Aliens.

Anyway, I won't try and explain what it was about but these cowboys were sort of battling these bad aliens and there was, it turns out at some point, a good alien amongst on the cowboy side. And so I was just kind of watching this, I think I must have been a little bit drugged on some medication or something, but I was kind of watching it somewhat bemused. And there's a scene right near the end where the good alien woman crawls into the core of the bad alien spaceship with an explosive device, clasps it with crossed arms to her heart center. This is a gesture. Can you see that? Crosses her arms, clasps this sort of small bomb, obviously a very powerful bomb, to her heart center, closes her eyes, and blows herself and the bad alien spaceship up in an act of self-sacrifice for the sake of her people and the humans on Earth.

And I didn't think that much about it at the time, other than what an odd movie this is, with cowboys and aliens in it, doing battle. But that image came up for me several times over the next few days, and it became imaginal for a few days. I sensed somehow a kind of—I sensed it somehow mirroring or mirrored in a way of relating to my life. Again, here's that echoing, infinite echoing and mirroring part of the meaningfulness. A way of relating to my life with the possibility of dying soon. And this was actually some months before I found out about the metastatic metastases.

Somehow there was something mirroring my life, the possibility of dying soon, my illness, a dedication to my work, our work, my sort of time and purpose and possible sacrifice for the sake of—and there's where the openness—but it had that openness, that infinite echoing of possibility there, for the sake of what? But it was powerful in its effects, this sort of image from a funny movie, extracted from a funny movie, in the energy body, in the sense of alignment, in the resonances, in the sense of my existence.

So her suicide in the movie, her dissolution in sacrificial explosion, seemed somehow to open up a kind of space of time, if you like, for my sense of a life dedicated to my soul duty, with all the kind of specifics of that, and the nebulousness of that, and the open-endedness, and the fuzzy edges, the soft elastic edges, and the individual meanings within an infinite meaningfulness, all of that.

But I choose that partly because it was such a sort of—seemed odd place for an image, a potent image to come from, but basically art can spawn images in us.

If, again, if we talk about the vessel or the womb in which images might take birth, I recall—sometimes I have to remind myself of this now. In the beginning, the initial stages when I was beginning to explore imaginal practice and how sort of completely opportunistic I would be, which I think is—what I'm trying to say is that's a really good thing. There was a huge willingness to go with the slightest kind of clues or sense of possibility of something becoming an image, the slightest cues. And that attitude, I think, is really helpful. It's part of a helpful vessel.

So sometimes we're too—I've talked about this again before. Sometimes doubt almost always comes up. "Oh, I don't know if that's a worthwhile image. That's probably just rubbish in the mind," whatever the doubt says. "Oh, that's too weird. That's not weird enough." Whatever the doubt is.

But that attitude of just being willing to go with something, work with it, see what happens—this is essential. And of course, sometimes you feel like, well, that wasn't very fertile, maybe that was a waste of time. But you can only learn something in the process.

I think at this point, for you, it might be a little different, because back then for me, there was no one telling me this is what should happen, or this is what you're aiming for, not this, or that's the path, these are the teachings. There wasn't that. I had read some Hillman and some Jung and some other material that didn't really touch me, and in a way, I was just exploring a whole territory of possibility and seeing what could be made of it or what felt helpful, what felt important, what ways of working were helpful, what ways of conceiving were helpful.

That's a little bit different from you maybe listening to Catherine and me saying it's like this and an image is this and not that. But still, what I want to emphasize right now is there's something about having a really "just go for it" sort of research attitude. Not prejudging whether we think something is going to be helpful or not. You'll learn a lot that way, and a lot that seems really unhelpful to start with can actually become potent image.

That's why sometimes when I give examples, I actually include those moments—oh, and the mind was drifting, and then there was a daydream, and I thought I was ignoring it and kind of putting it to one side, and then I decided to turn towards it, and that very daydream that seemed unimportant became really fertile.

So I want to encourage that kind of attitude of opportunism, research, just trying, just going for it. This is really important.

And then as one works with an image, of course, because it's so dependent on the way of looking and the way of relating, when we can start to tweak and change the relationship we have with an image and respond to what's happening, something that may have seemed very inconsequential or irrelevant or just silly can become image.

Related to this—and I've shared this before—I remember back in the initial stages when I was exploring

this, the images were really quite different than they are now. And I look back and think, well, that really wasn't imaginal in the sense that we have, but it doesn't matter. It's part of getting the feet wet, working out, getting practice, getting skill, getting facility. And then you can steer that process guided by what feels soul-making, what feels beautiful, as it goes, rather than being too quick to judge, oh, that's not right, oh, that can't be, and then dismissing things. Nothing can get going that way.

I've put out in the past, in the imaginal talks and maybe in some other talks as well, a whole list of possible techniques—I don't have to call them tricks, but techniques—to see if one can kick-start the imaginal process or at least receive some images that can then become imaginal. I'm not going to list them again, but sometimes—and this might be something I've said before, but it's worth saying again—sometimes we put too much pressure on demanding an image.

No one's going to have images all the time, all day long, in any way. It's really important, as we've stressed on retreat, to move between imaginal practice and other practices, like just being with the emotions, or being with the energy body, or exploring that. But sometimes we might be trying too hard to get or receive an image, and it may be that we need to actually be more sensitive or attentive to, in an unpressured way, sensitive and attentive to the pain or lack or confusion we are feeling. Or, as I said, veering. Don't put too much pressure on that. Just do some practice with the energy body or with the emotions as I said, or samādhi, or emptiness, or metta, or whatever it is.

Sometimes—and again, partly why I include the fact of, oh, in this image there was some daydreaming or the mind kept drifting off or whatever it was—it may be actually that we need to loosen the mind and let it drift a bit sometimes. And out of this, somehow, an image will constellate.

But if we go back to what we were talking about in the definition of fantasy yesterday evening, sometimes we need to stop putting the pressure on the meditation. The image may already exist for us in our lives and how we see our lives at times, as fantasy or as a being or event in our life that either is already somewhat imaginal or certainly has that potential. And it can be picked up on there outside of formal meditation quite easily and then perhaps brought into the meditation if one wants.

It's interesting with some Dharma practices, and certainly with imaginal practices, if we think just a little bit about, for instance, the way mindfulness is often taught—just to make a distinction, a difference. With mindfulness practice, the instruction is repeated so often it becomes kind of implicit in the contemporary definition or understanding of mindfulness. It's a whole question whether that's actually what the Buddha meant by mindfulness or his intention. But the instruction is repeated so often, the instruction being: it doesn't matter what experience arises. Mindfulness is not about this or that experience, but it's a way of being with or a relationship to any experience.

So most of you will be familiar with that kind of way of understanding, a way of practicing mindfulness. So it becomes possible to practice mindfulness every day, formally and informally in life, and sort of put the time in to practice without any real possibility of failure, because it doesn't matter what experience

arises. And if you forget to be mindful, you just remind yourself again, you get back in the saddle.

With metta practice, or breath concentration practices, or other more popular practices, this same idea is taught, that actually it doesn't matter what the experience is. But usually in those contexts of metta and breath practice, it takes a little longer for the student, the practitioner, to catch on that it doesn't actually matter. Usually it's, I'm not feeling any metta, or I was feeling it, now it's really dry, or the breath... I'm not having any great experiences.

And again, usually it's taught or we do teach that in a way it doesn't matter when we're talking about working with using the breath as an anchor or doing metta practice. But once that coin, that penny drops for the practitioner, that maybe it doesn't matter, then similarly to mindfulness practice, the student can put the time in and just return over and over, return to the phrases, just keep going, just come back to the breath, it doesn't matter. And not concern themselves with the need for any particular experience to arise, with doing it wrong, with the whole notions of failing or succeeding at practice.

So all that's actually really good and really helpful as a teaching, as an emphasis, especially for our modern culture of individualism where there's also the concomitant pandemic of self-criticism and inner critic and all that. So it's good, it's skillful teaching. It's really important.

It also, though, has its potential pitfalls. Sloppiness and even incorrectness or unhelpful practice can become a kind of unquestioned and unquestionable norm. So the conscience is soothed by a kind of blind faith: "I'm just doing this over and over." But it may not be that this way of practicing, or this way of regarding practice, is actually the most helpful.

Sometimes what happens for some people, or even in some sanghas, is that practice and the path can become devoid of any sense of progress or goal. In a way, there's a kind of merciful release in that because one does away with the pressure or the danger of feeling like a failure. But it can also mean that practice delivers only a pitiful fraction of what it otherwise might.

When we think about different practices and the attitudes toward getting certain kinds of experience—if we consider emptiness practices, for instance—I would teach that they actually are supposed to yield certain openings or experiences or shifts of perception. But there's also a way that such practices can be regarded as simply engaging repeatedly in this or that way of looking, eventually subsuming everything else into that way of looking, just as mindfulness as a way of looking or stance can subsume any experience, even after the fact. "Oh, now I notice I've been lost. Okay, that noticing I've been lost is a moment of mindfulness, so it's okay, it's good." You're probably very familiar with hearing that kind of teaching.

But if we translate that to, let's say, anicca practice or anatta practice—as I would conceive them, where one deliberately sees things as anicca, as impermanent, or as anatta, as not me, not mine, not self—and the mind wanders while one is trying to do that practice, then one can decide to see the actual wandering

of the mind as impermanent, or the staying focused as impermanent. So everything can get subsumed in those practices, anicca, anatta. Again, it helps loosen and soften the brittleness and danger that can come with over-emphasis on "Am I succeeding? Am I failing? Am I getting the experience I'm supposed to get?" Even when the mind wanders, it's just anicca. The focus of the mind is anicca. The stability of the mind is impermanent. Or that drifting of the mind is not self—it's just the mind doing its thing. It's what minds do, and then later they do something different.

What about, though, if we ask the same question regarding imaginal practice or soul-making practice? This is a little more complex because an image is a certain experience, and an imaginary image is a certain experience. Sensing the soul is a certain realm of experience that's not run-of-the-mill, ordinary experience. So what can we say about this?

One thing is—remember, as I stressed yesterday—there's always the possibility of practicing what we might call foundations or fundamentals: the energy body awareness, the samadhi, the emotional awareness and skill, practices like anatta, the tuning and the balance of attention. All these are part of soul-making practice. So it's not probably wise or even possible to do imaginal practice all the time, but one has a much broader palette of practices to dip in and out of.

When an image is not arising or seems difficult to sustain, one can always move into these other practices, and we're still taking care of the foundations and roots of imaginal practice. As we said, you can always revisit a previous image or a prescribed image or a kind of conventional image, or one can entertain a deliberate idea. Remember—I'll come back to this both tonight and in future talks—one can entertain a certain idea, and that idea, because conception influences, shapes, opens or closes perceptions, can be transformative. Entertaining, lightly holding a certain idea about the cosmos, about self, about matter, about the world, about one's personal history, about dukkha, about anything—that entertaining of that idea deliberately, lightly, skillfully, becomes like a seed or yeast that opens up the perception to more sensing with soul.

So there are all those possibilities when it seems like certain experiences—imaginal images—are not occurring immediately. Sometimes an image isn't arising; it seems a bit barren. But we can try to adopt, just gently, skillfully, a stance of humility and openness—openness of the energy body, openness of the heart, of the being, of the soul, in relation to one's life. That might be in relation to the whole narrative of one's life, the span of one's life, in relation to a dukkha, even a trivial or relatively trivial dukkha. Is it possible to find my way into some kind of stance of humility and openness with regard to all of that?

Perhaps in relationship to some vague sense of divinity—and that is not formed as an image. So I have a kind of beginnings of humility, beginnings of openness, or I'm attempting to support a gentle openness to all that, to the dukkha, to the sense of life and being and soul. I have some vague sense of divinity—it's not an image—but all that is soul-making practice because we're dealing with the elements there that are roots, fundamentals, aspects of images. Even if an image doesn't arise from that, it's a beautiful space to be

in.

It's a beautiful posture, a beautiful poise of the soul to inhabit and to practice. And it's possible that it will be very fertile. That out of that humility and openness in relation to dukkha and in relation to some vague sense of non-imaged divinity, something may emerge. The self, or one's life, and one's narrative becomes image, arising from that soil, that fertile soil, the material in the alchemical vessel, from the womb that's being created there.

As I said before, imaginal practice is partly art and partly grace. There is an art to it. That's why we talk about all these elements. That's why I'm giving all these talks and saying you can do this, you can do that, or emphasize this more, draw that out, pay attention to this. There's a lot of art—sophisticated and subtle art that we can develop—so that we are tending to the conditions that support the possibility of images arising and touching us and moving us and becoming soul-making.

But it's art and grace. There's always going to be an aspect of imaginal practice that is beyond our control, that's not in our power, never completely within our mastery. There's some kind of... we are given images. Sometimes images arise—if you've been practicing soul-making Dharma for a while, you'll recognize this—sometimes you have an experience, or you're with someone who's reporting an experience, and you wonder: how could it be, given everything that was going on, this particular dukkha, and that particular history, and that particular view, and this difficulty, that some image arises that one never could have predicted? And yet it somehow carries with it the soul's intelligence of perfectly addressing and perfectly opening up in the most beautiful ways, in the most particular ways, the most particularly attuned ways, everything that was involved in the constellation of difficulty or situation or perception just beforehand.

It's a gift from the depths of soul. It's grace. We couldn't have conjured that, couldn't have figured it out. "Oh yes, I think I should imagine this." So part art, partly grace. And that's really good to remember with imaginal practice.

Yes, we are interested in certain kinds of experiences—sensing the soul and imaginal experiences. But I'm really talking about attitude. Attitude is part of the vessel. The attitude is part of a healthy, nourishing, rich womb.

Sometimes it's good not to put too much pressure on the visual sense. Even when a person knows and has understood that images are not necessarily visual, or that's not the most important thing, sometimes there can just be a subtle habit or tendency to expect or demand some kind of visual experience.

In the last week or so, I've found a helpful phrase for myself: let the body lead. Let the body lead. This of course means the energy body and the whole awareness and sensitivity to the whole energy body. It's as if that has a kind of intelligence. That becomes a factor, one of the elements, but as an element it ignites and is part of the alchemy. It's part of what allows the alchemical process, because then something comes through the body, or the body senses, and the body leads the way to an imaginal sense, which may then

involve something visual, or may not—instead of almost unconsciously putting just a little bit too much pressure on wanting something visual, some visual experience or transformation of a scene. Let the body lead. Just check, take the pressure off any visual expectation or demand for visuals.

And notice the heart and the emotions. Sometimes it's about relaxing with that and finding or tuning a certain poise. So much of imaginal practice and sensing the soul is really about poise—finding, being responsive and tuning, discovering the right poise of being, poise of attention, poise of heart, poise of intention, attitude. All that is part of the poise that will vary from time to time. What is the poise that allows image to come forth, if it's given by the grace of the gods at that point?

A little while ago, on a spring evening with beautiful light through the young green leaves and the translucence of the foliage and trees, I let the body lead. I was in a car, relaxing the body and being aware of the whole energy body. What came first to awareness was the sense of being loved. It wasn't something visual that came first. There was this poise, played with a little bit in relaxation—take the pressure off the visual, be with the whole body, let the body lead, and notice.

I noticed there was a sense: I'm loved. It wasn't visual. That's what came first. And that's a node, isn't it? It's one of the nodes: loving and being loved. So it was part of one of the nodes that came first, not any kind of image, not sensing the soul in the more obvious sense that we might commonly expect. And being with that very lovely feeling—subtle but lovely feeling of being loved—I wasn't quite sure who was loving me here.

And then slowly, gradually—it happened over a minute or two, I think—all the trees began to reveal themselves differently. There was a sense, and again it's quite vague, and I'm pointing out the vagueness so that you will recognize that sometimes you have a powerful imaginal sense and there are aspects of it that are vague, and it does not matter.

So either the trees were angels, or they were somehow associated with angels—angels I could not see, again, not visual. I sort of heard them; that's the closest I could come to it. And these angels that either were the trees or were associated with the trees, resonant with the trees somehow, they were loving me. And that was the image sense, the imaginal sense—that was the sensing the soul. But it was probably allowed by taking the pressure off, this really subtle and unconscious demand for a visual transformation, a visual experience.

Again, by the way, this points to something important. When we talk about an imaginal image or a sensing the soul, we're talking about a confluence of elements: energy, body, poise, attitude, love, being loved, and so forth.

Just lingering on that example a moment longer—there's again this kind of opportunistic attitude. It's as if, as I said, the antennae are open and working without pressure, just ready to receive, ready to tune. They're sensitive, tuned to receive anything that could be or become soul-making.

Actually, what's also interesting here—this is a different experience, but somewhat similar that I had—the being loved came first, and then an emotional awareness came of grief. So what does this imply? It implies that in this confluence of elements that we call an image, an imaginal image or an imaginal constellation, there's not always a linear or predictable progression of the ignition of the elements of that imaginal constellation or of the lattice.

So in this case, it was, as I said, the love, being loved came first, then the emotional awareness. Oh, there's an emotion there that was kind of liberated to be felt more clearly and more helpfully and more deeply. Now we could ask—this is by the by—was that emotion, was that grief there already, so to speak, waiting to show itself, to be felt when love was present? Or is an emotion anyway always a dependent arising, so that it doesn't, like anything else, pre-exist this or that condition that's part of it? So there was a certain emotion that arose with love that wasn't there first. That's by the by.

Again, talking about what can help us to receive, to open to images, for them to be born, for the transubstantiation to happen in our chemical vessel: sometimes we might be feeling quite flat in the sense that our perception is quite one-dimensional. We might feel unresourced or unanchored or overwhelmed, and so on. Taking that into the meditation, including that into the meditation—and I've talked about this, I think, in the *Dukkha and Soul-making* talks—there might be a way of gently regarding one's life and oneself from the perspective of beyond death, so to speak, *subspeciae eternatis*, from the perspective, from the view of eternity.

As if you see your whole life, your whole narrative, however long that is, however long it's given you on this earth, in this form, in this manifestation—you see the whole thing as if from beyond time, like a tableau, a snapshot. And that move, that perspective, if you can find your way into that perspective, including all the difficulty that's going on, all the challenge that's going on, it can—that very move itself can allow and support a sensing the soul of oneself.

One senses oneself with soul, one's narrative with soul, and then also the world, and so forth. And it may not be that an intrapsychic image arises from that. It may just be that that's the imaginal sense of myself, of my life, of my journey between birth and death, of this whole movement of the narrative with all the difficulties and the challenges and the duties and the beauties there, and the particularities.

So again, when I say this from the point of view beyond time or beyond death or from the perspective of eternity, I don't mean a kind of view that goes into a perception of it all being one in some vast awareness. That's great—it's a wonderful mystical perception, really helpful at times—but what we're talking about includes and retains and gives import to and significance to the particularities of our soul, our lives, our journeys, our narratives, our difficulties, our *dukkha*, and so forth. Rather than dissolving them in some kind of equality of oneness—wonderful as that is at times—this is a different kind of leaning.

But there's a change in perspective there that allows self and world to be sensed with soul. So that kind of thing is very potent and important too.

Another example: Catherine and I were talking a little while ago, and she was sharing something—which I won't explain from her angle—but one of the things she shared was an idea, the idea: "I am soul." It was just a piece of what she was saying, and she had taken it and was taking it in a certain direction. But that idea, that phrase stayed with me: "I am soul." And I began over a few days practicing with that idea. It became quite potent for me.

So there was this idea which she shared—it was just a part of something she was sharing, an exploration she was sharing with me.

But somehow that idea landed in my mind and heart, and I began using it as something in my practice that helped to engender sensing the soul. So "I am soul," in a way. What it really was, or part of what it was for me, how I used it, was this kind of movement of identification away from a sort of maybe typical or default modern view of who I am or what's the essential reality of a human being. And it was coupled with this idea of the Buddha nature or God participating in my soul. So "I am soul" is also that I am soul—I am part of God's soul or part of the Buddha nature's soul. My soul participates in God, in the Buddha nature. So all that was part of this loose idea. It was fairly loose, but potent, in that it relativized the relationship with the body and matter, and relativizes also the ontological status of the body. I am soul. I am not just body.

Again, this wasn't filled out as an idea in all its details and all its philosophy. It was reasonably loose. But with that relativization of the ontological status of the body, it's a bit like seeing the emptiness of something—of the body and matter. And so perception, there was a degree of less fabrication, just some, and it kind of loosened and liquefied the perception of self, body, world, matter. We talked about this importance of liquefying, loosening through slightly less fabrication.

With that, there was the element of the fullness of intention—the intention for the fullness of soul-making. So not just "I intend to" or "I hope that I survive physically somehow miraculously, I hope that this body survives this illness, some miracle happens with matter." Sure, I can hope that—that may be part of an intention, even in prayer, even in imaginal practice—but the fullness of intention goes beyond that and includes as more paramount this wanting to serve soul.

So with those elements there—the loosening, the liquefying, the sense of participation, the fullness of intention—then the world around me, my body, my illness, my life, myself, matter, the interaction of body and soul, all of that was open to sensing the soul. Very, very beautiful and fertile opening that happened.

One of the more general principles in what I've just shared is the fact that there's an idea—and even when the idea is not that clearly spelled out or worked out, "I am soul"—and it became associated with other ideas and might have been a little bit different, or even quite a lot different from what Catherine meant originally. It doesn't matter. The principle is: an idea, as I mentioned earlier, can be taken up and function as a kind of soul-making seed, a seed for soul-making, a yeast, something that fertilizes and opens the sensing the soul and the perception of anything, really.

Again, I don't want to stretch the analogies of alchemy or womb and birth too much. But if we talk about how to take care of images once they're there and how do we take care of them—here's a birth and how do we tend to that infant? Again, I don't want to stretch the analogy too far, but I want to share something from a yogi who gave me permission to share this. Just to emphasize this point: when an image is partially formed, our attunement, our kind of sensitivity to what is essential here—in the sense of what feels, what aspect of it feels soulful, feels the most soul-making—and it might be an idea, or it might be an aspect of the image, or it could be anything. But that attuning helps to nourish the image and allow it to become more fully imaginal and potent.

So this person was sharing with me a while ago—more than a year probably—sharing that the painter Egon Schiele, a Viennese painter at the turn of the century, some of you will know, Egon Schiele the painter, and also Bach's music are often imaginal figures for her. Not so much Bach the person or the composer, but Bach's music, and Egon Schiele the painter. So these two were images.

And she shared an image with me—the image of Schiele painting her portrait. I'm not sure if she was posing naked for it, but that was the image. And having heard the teachings that I gave on eros and sexuality, and also having felt like there was a certain aridity in general in her practice, which she thought might be blocking her eros—because she felt no opportunity to express or share eros, share her eros sexually or romantically in her life, and so that she was blocking her eros, and that caused a certain aridity in general in her practice—so she was wondering about that and kind of thinking, well, if that's the case, maybe I should steer the image towards something more sexual. But it didn't feel right.

So it's not the fact of having thought "maybe I should steer it this way" and then steering it that way. That in itself, as I said last night, is not a problem. It may be a problem, but we ascertain: oh, it just doesn't feel right. It doesn't feel like that's what needs to happen. Or that doesn't actually feel soul-making. Partly what was happening here was that there was a limited idea of what eros is.

But the not feeling right, she tried something, tried to steer it towards an image of sex with the painter, but that didn't feel right. And that not feeling right is an indication and a sense to trust, just as the feeling right is also an indication and a sense to trust, conversely.

But again, going back to the point about eros, it's worth stressing again. Eros in our language is not necessarily sexual. There can be eros that has no sexual element in it at all, and sex can certainly be without eros in our language, in our sense. But anyway, eros is not necessarily sexual.

So perhaps she also had a kind of limited idea of eros and also what needed to happen in her life. So I was responding to this and suggested that there was eros in the being painted. The painters had eros for her body and for art and for the making of art, and she could perhaps get a sense or an experience of that kind of subtle, if you like, more subtle, at least non-obviously sexual eros, through his being in the image.

In other words, tuning into, here's the image of him painting me, what's his experience of eros? And not

confining it or expecting it to be sexual. It might be other than sexual - for art, for body, for beauty, for whatever. And in his being and in the whole scene, there might be eros also in the sense of being painted, of being looked at like that, of the body being an object of the regard, of the reverential artistic regard, an object for the perception of beauty.

And maybe that, again, who knows what would happen, I didn't hear back from her after this, after that interview, but it might be that then eros comes in her life for her own body in different ways, all kinds of possibilities from that seed.

But again, it's this necessity to tune into actually, in this case, where is the eros? Because with the eros will be the soul-making sense, right? They go together, of course. So where is the soul-making? Where is the soulfulness? What's the aspect or strand of this complex image? Already I've got someone painting me. It's already complex as an image. It has all kinds of things in it. What of that... where do I kind of hone in on what's soulful and soul-making? And this is a way we tend to, we care for an image, we nourish it, we allow it to grow.

Same person shared another image, which was actually a passage or a scene from Bach's St. Matthew's Passion. Some of you may know it's a great piece of music. And the centurion at Christ's crucifixion, centurions are guarding or watching Christ's crucifixion, in Bach's piece, says or sings twice, "Truly thou art the Son of God, truly thou art the Son of God."

And she said, reporting this, that passage moves me to tears every time. All of it, the music of it, the theatre of it, even though she said, "I'm not, and I never have been, a Christian." It's just something in there moves me. It was, again, inexplicable. The soul is touched inexplicably there.

And again, my question was about eros. So, again, there is eros there. It's in the centurion for Christ. He, in looking that way, he didn't expect to have that experience. "Truly thou art the Son of God." His feelings and gaze towards Jesus are more than just metta, and certainly more than some kind of coldly logical conclusion about Jesus's ontological nature. "Oh, you are divine." There is, carried by the music in those words, "truly thou the son of God," there is more than metta and more than a sort of deduction of some kind of fact, existential fact.

And unlikely in her image that the centurion has got some kind of sexual attraction to Jesus. I mean, there's no reason why that might not be part of it, but it didn't sound like that's what was going on. But this gaze and this relationship in that moment of the centurion, in his feelings, there was eros there. They're erotic in our sense, in touch with, attracted to, drawn to, sensing the beauty and mystery and dimensionality and divinity of Jesus.

And so, I'm looking for the eros and the eros goes with the soul making. So tuning into that in the image, relaxing the usual preconceptions, in this case about eros, and tuning into, ah, there's the eros.

How does that feel? What kind of quality does that have? Can I let my soul resonate with that? In this case,

the centurion's imagined experience, or imagination of the centurion's experience, our sense of that, our receptivity to that experience—that's where the soulfulness and the soul-making is.

So sometimes it's just a more subtle receptivity and sensitivity to notice and tune to where the eros and soul-making is with an image at any time. This is very much part of what allows an image to have its vitality and allows us to nourish it, to feed it.

And again, if we talk about tending images, some of you may have noticed this, but sometimes images happen in a series. Sometimes you get the same image coming back deliberately, or it just comes back for a while or long stretches of time, or periodically over sometimes years. But sometimes you get images that seem to express a similar theme or have a similar kind of object, but they're actually different. We can see that sometimes images are happening in series like that. There's a series of images, which is important.

I remember about a year ago, I had an image of a dervish—the Sufi dancers, beautiful dancers, mystical dancers, out of divine love. It's actually not so important what the image was. What is important is that, again, it wasn't very visually clear. It didn't even have, this particular image didn't even have, at the moment of arising and working with it in meditation, a very strong impact. And I think the mind was actually drifting quite a bit. It was at a time when I was struggling with certain medication and not sleeping because of a thyroid condition. So the mind was drifting. It didn't have a strong impact, and it certainly wasn't very visually clear.

A little while later, though, I was on a train platform going to see a doctor, and the train was late, so I just took the opportunity to walk up and down the platform. And the body felt so open and free, and I might say naked, but again, it was a very particular kind of feeling of openness, freedom, and nakedness.

What had happened before that dervish image was that there was this whole series of images related to body. A few of them had to do with sensing my body as an instrument. And that came out of a little bit what I shared last night about the grief in relation to music and giving up the instrument that I used to play as a jazz musician—guitar—and working with it over a period of time in the meditation and actually seeing, sensing my body as a kind of instrument, to be played or for me to play or both. And so that was a certain sensing with soul of the body. And that was, I think, some days or maybe even weeks before.

But images may come in series to affect this or that, to make soul—the organ of sensing—the soul, in this case sensing the body with soul. Each individual instance of an image in that series, sometimes we might not even connect them, and then you look back and you see, "Oh, there's a connection here." Each individual image may not always be powerful, or you might even think, "Well, that was kind of neither here nor there, it's not one to write home about." But cumulatively, something is being worked on in the soul.

Again, the soul's intelligence is operating, in this case, in a series of images of different perceived impacts and importance at the time, but somehow the soul is stitching these together over time with gaps in

between. And in that walking up and down, that sense of the body, which is also a sense of self, sensed as—again, it went into a kind of cosmopoiesis in its connection with the surroundings, but very particular, particular to that image, particular to the kind of nakedness, a sense of nakedness and openness and freedom that came into the body with that.

The point is about the series, and somehow, again, attitude, trust, not dismissing something because it may be part of a bigger picture which we don't grasp yet, we don't glimpse yet, because we haven't stitched those things together. Something is operating below the radar with an intelligence that is beyond us. And it's only after the fact, or after a little while, we say, "Oh, there's a process there."

There's also, you know, I've sort of said this, but it's worth just making it clear—some images are very slow to become fully imaginal, for all the elements to sort of ignite. Sometimes that happens over many sessions, sometimes it's gradual, sometimes they don't seem promising at first.

So this, again, I think I alluded to it or spent a bit of time talking about it, the whole question of pacing in the path of the imaginal talk, and a kind of sensitivity or achievement or wisdom to the pacing that is involved in any kind of imaginal birth and imaginal tending, or tending to the imaginal path. Do I need to stay with this for longer, or move on to another image, or whatever it is, or let something develop, even if it seems not so promising?

So this is all part of, again, whether we call it part of the womb, or part of the tending, or part of the birthing. The analogy breaks down, it doesn't matter, but I want you to understand the point there, really about attitude to practice and what actually can support more helpfully the opening up the world of images and sensing the soul.

Sometimes a person, following this theme a little longer, sometimes a person has an image and wants to write a poem about the image. So this is, again, something for you to find out and do your own research. I have periods in my life where I write a lot of poetry and it's something very important to me. But I don't actually, for myself, tend to write poems about images that come in imaginal practice. It feels like that does something. It takes away—for me, it takes away some of the potency and the possibility of that image.

So again, I don't want to set down rules, but it's something to be careful about and to investigate whether you want to, or if someone wants to paint an image, you know, or sculpt it. Now Jung, I think, insisted that when patients could, that they painted or sculpted or rendered materially manifest some image that came to them or a dream or something. I'm a little more cautious, and I think, again, here's one instance where perhaps our practice forges a different path, goes in a different direction.

When I contemplate creating something material from an imaginal image—writing a poem, painting, sculpting—I encounter a delicate consideration of timing and intention. If I move too quickly to artistic expression, it may diminish the potential development and fullness of the image itself, potentially detracting from our relationship with it in its purely imaginal dimension.

This isn't a categorical prohibition, but rather an invitation to careful investigation. Does artistic expression enhance or limit the soul-making potential of a particular image? To truly understand this, one must experiment thoughtfully—working with some images through artistic expression and allowing others to remain in their imaginal form, then observing what unfolds.

If we do choose to create artistically from an imaginal image, we must consider when, how, and what needs to be involved in that process to preserve the image's soul-making potential. There may indeed be artistic potential in such creation, but this may not overlap with the soul-making dimension—they might be entirely different aspects.

As an artist or poet, one naturally has other concerns: form, rhythm, balance, sound, visual composition. These require careful attention and tuning, but they are not inherently imaginal. However, the engagement with art itself can become imaginal—the self as artist in that process may become imaginal. This differs from the image itself being imaginal in our relationship with it.

For me, these represent divergent directions rather than the same path. I maintain a soul-making relationship with writing poetry, composing music, and crafting dharma teachings. But this differs from allowing a specific image to be fully soul-making, to work completely in the soul and catalyze the soul-making dynamic in relation to that particular image.

While Jung and Jungian approaches tend to emphasize the materialization of images through painting or sculpting, I believe our practice materializes images differently—through the energy body, through emotionally sensitive relationship, through refractions into duty and infinite mirroring. These constitute genuine forms of materialization: the image materializes in the body, in emotions, doing its transformative work and shaping our being.

This process, along with the refractions into duty and the infinite echoing mirroring in our lives, demands great sensitivity and attentiveness. When our sensitivity becomes occupied with artistic intentions—with form, color, shading, balance, or rhythm—we engage a somewhat different intention than pure soul-making in relation to that image.

Similar considerations apply to expressing images through movement and dance. Again, I don't wish to establish rigid laws but rather encourage careful exploration. If you choose to investigate this territory, do so with integrity, discernment, precision, and open-mindedness. You may discover you can maintain both artistic process and soul-making relationship—perhaps it's a matter of timing or approach.

In our retreat explorations of movement—whether with others or alone, in groups or individually—we've touched on movement's relationship with soul-making and image in various ways. The potential here is genuinely exciting, though we must remain alert to whether movement diverts, hinders, or limits the soul-making potential of particular images.

Several practitioners have shared that dance and movement powerfully stimulate images and provide the

most fertile ground for image generation. This may indeed be true, and individual differences certainly exist—what renders the imaginal impossible for one person may be profoundly generative for another. These possibilities encompass both personal propensities and capacities that can be developed through practice.

The crucial question becomes: are all the subtleties of imaginal practice accessible while moving or dancing? They might be, or they might become accessible through dedicated practice and training. Yet by the very nature of movement and dance, we might limit how delicate and sensitive we can be in relationship to an image, potentially constraining the fertility, depth, richness, and potency of soul-making with that image.

This remains territory for exploration, experimentation, and research—for myself, for others, for all of us drawn to these possibilities. I want to ensure that this teaching doesn't simply reflect my own tendencies or capacities at the expense of different capacities others might possess. The logos must remain spacious enough to embrace diverse ways of engaging with the imaginal while maintaining the precision necessary for authentic soul-making.

So we can talk, and we have been talking about, what is it to take care of the ground of images and the ground of soul? What is it to have a good working alchemical vessel? What is it to take care of the gestation, the birth, and the aftercare of images—to have a good womb and to have the possibility of the birthing of images and the tending to what is born there?

There was a great pagan philosopher and Neoplatonist called Iamblichus who lived many centuries ago. He's not that well-known actually, but he talked about pagan rituals and the relationship with the gods, using a certain Greek word: *epitediotis*. What he really meant was the kind of fitness or aptitude to receive a form—to receive, let's say, an image for our purposes. In other words, the care of the vessel, the care for the womb and the birth.

This *epitediotis* is this fitness or aptitude. It came to be used by Neoplatonists to explain why there were different kinds of experiences in ritual—different mystical experiences. Iamblichus used an image which parallels some of the Buddha's teachings: just as dry wood provides the capacity, the fitness or aptitude for fire to manifest, to be actual, similarly, the purity of a soul provides the capacity for a god to become manifest.

Plotinus as well, the founder of Neoplatonism, accounted for different experiences of souls in the presence of the holy ideas as being due to differences in the fitness of the recipient, the quality of the vessel at that time. We don't have to say that this person or that person is always more fit—it's not who they are. Rather, at one time, the vessel is like this; at another time, the vessel is like that. Plotinus compared it to the reception of light in clear or muddy water—how that water holds or reflects or carries the sunlight that falls on it differs greatly depending on whether it's muddy or clear.

For Iamblichus, it's interesting that his teaching puts everything very much in the passive voice—it's the gods doing things. When we talk about the element of autonomy, that the image has autonomy, meaning personhood and intelligence and will, Iamblichus very much emphasizes that as being more important than our ability to control what happens, what experiences occur, or what mystical openings unfold. So he talks very much about the fitness, the *epitediotis*—the aptitude of a passive element to receive the influence of an active one, in this case, a god.

Purifications—and this is a loaded word, I know, but I'm going to try and give it a certain slant—are necessary for every soul. Iamblichus says that the time one spends in prayer nourishes the intuitive mind and generally enlarges the soul's receptacle for the gods, the soul's readiness for divine transformation. He's talking about this aptitude, this fitness. It describes conditions of the soul that are fit to receive the god, a kind of cleansing of the soul that makes it fit. The soul itself was a kind of receptacle of the god, the soul itself is the alchemical vessel.

In our paradigm, in our language, then, all the elements of the imaginal—all those twenty-eight nodes we've talked about, and maybe more, such as vulnerability, certainly humility, certainly the imaginal middle way, the theater-like quality, the neither real nor not real, certainly the openness to duty, certainly reverence and love, fullness of intention—all of these we could say are part of the *epitediotis*, the caring for the aptitude, the fitness to receive image and to receive divine image. They're part of the purity.

You can hear the humility, the reverence, the willingness, the openness to duty, the love, the fullness of intention. These all have to do with purity of soul at that time. And they allow the image to become fully imaginal and the sense of divinity. And also, as we said before, the relationship with emotions—this is all part of the fitness of the vehicle, the aptitude, the caring for the vessel at the time.

Okay, so we're going to go into quite a bit more detail on some of this, but I just wanted to give some hopefully helpful pointers today.

Thank you for listening.

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