The Invitation of Otherness (Autonomy, Eros, and Intentionality)

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We've been talking about various aspects of the relationship with images—possibilities for how we can sense and conceive of this relationship, our relationship with them, their relationship with us, their gaze, their love. I want to continue expanding and filling out some aspects of the possibilities for relationship with image, weaving this into some of the nodes, the elements.

Of course, all the twenty-eight nodes are, in a way, various components, characterizations, or qualifications of our relationship with images. The imaginal itself is more a relationship than a thing in itself. But relationship obviously implies two things, two entities—two subjects, really. This immediately connects with our element, our node of two-ness, which we expanded to two-ness, differentiation, retaining of particularities.

Eros, we have said many times, in the way that we're defining and conceiving of it, needs two-ness. So there's an erotic tension between two—between this subject and that subject, essentially subject, because what we are in erotic relationship with, we soon begin to sense as subject, as other, if we're not already sensing it that way.

So eros needs two-ness. Where there's a collapsing into melting, into union—lovely as that can be, and it can be very lovely and fruitful sometimes—with regard to the eros between those two objects, it collapses at that moment. The fertility of the eros in terms of its insemination of the soul-making dynamic, its beautiful proliferation of life, also collapses when the two-ness collapses into union, into oneness, important as that is as a kind of experience at times.

We could also say, and we have said in the past, that eros will create and discover more differentiation, more particularities, more otherness in a way. We have to be careful what we mean by that. A sense of otherness, a sense of an other, a relationship with an other, a two-ness—otherness is already a given for us most of the time. The way consciousness works and the constitution of experience entails, involves a sense of otherness, even when we know and perceive our fundamental oneness with all things.

That mystical sense, that important, beautiful mystical sense of knowing and really perceiving this fundamental oneness with all things—phenomenally, meaning in terms of appearance, others still appear to us. Even when I know deeply my oneness, I can still navigate in the world, go to the toilet, make my breakfast. This involves some degree of perception of other. The breakfast is other, the toast is other, the toilet bowl is other. So even when we know oneness, phenomenally, others still appear to us. Perception,

in the way that it works, delineates self and other.

Eros, though, we say, creates and discovers more otherness. But what do we mean when we say that? We don't really mean that it creates a greater distance between self and other as a kind of alienation. Rather, eros will create and discover—there'll be ongoing discovery and creation of more and more dimensions, particularities, aspects, images—within a beloved other. So that beloved other has more faces of otherness, more kinds of otherness. The othernesses there become plural and richly complexified.

Two-ness, otherness, particularities—all of that. Wrapped up or very much connected with this element of two-ness is autonomy. We talk about the autonomy of self and other. Let's take just a little time to unpack some aspects of that.

When we're meditating with an image, when we're in contact, in dialogue, in relationship with an image, we'll probably or likely have a sense—again, it's something that we begin to notice when it's pointed out—that the image, or even just an aspect or a quality of that image, is somehow both me and not me. It's both mine and not mine. That's related to its infinite echoing and all kinds of things. So this sort of double sense—it's kind of me and it's kind of not me, it's kind of mine, or this aspect that it has is kind of mine, this quality that it has is kind of mine and really kind of not mine.

This double sense is part of the sense of its two-ness. It's also part of the image's autonomy, the imaginal figure's autonomy, and maybe also part of the imaginal middle way—me and not me, real and not real. But because of that sense of two-ness and autonomy there, that can support a sense of other elements. As usual with all the elements and their interconnectedness, the way they ignite and feed off and open each other up, turn each other on—with the autonomy of the other, the otherness of the other, the two-ness there, there can be a sense of grace, of gift. We're receiving something. Love also between the two. Sometimes we love them more when we recognize their autonomy.

Beauty, mystery, unfathomability, dimensionality—all of this is supported by that sense of otherness in many ways.

In discussing the element of autonomy of self and other, we've also mentioned personhood as possibly wrapped up with this—not just a sense of the autonomy of the image, but a sense of the personhood of the image. Sometimes I think we've put that out as part of the teaching. That's perhaps a little more questionable, or maybe not—it could be included, though I'm not sure.

I think autonomy, the autonomy of the image, is always there. That's a crucial aspect of an image becoming fully imaginal. It's not just a part of me. It's not completely under my control. It's like a being. It is a being. It has its own autonomy, its own intelligence, its own will, its own perception, its own desire.

Personhood is, as I said, a little more uncertain. Definitely, of course, sometimes we have the sense of personhood of an image. We might even have a sense of personhood of a tree, for example. We don't usually think of a tree as a person, but we can feel its personhood as well as its autonomy when we're

sensing it with soul. But a lot of these things depend on where we draw the line with definitions.

I think at one point, and I mentioned it the other day, I delineated four kinds of domains or kinds of experience that can open up from an image. If I remember, the third one was this kind of space of the essence or the character of an imaginal figure. Someone was asking a question about Aslan—they were meditating on Aslan, the lion from The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe from the Narnia tales. At some point, the perception of Aslan as a form faded and went into a vast empty space, but that space was imbued with the essence, the character of Aslan. A very beautiful possibility that can happen sometimes. I'm not sure it should go there all the time, but still in the domain of the imaginal and soul-making, definitely.

We mentioned the other night the sense of the four elements—earth, air, fire, and water—and them having the dimensionality, divinity, mystery, unfathomability, and the way they connect with your body and the possibility of meditating that way. But they may or may not have personhood. If they get connected with those four goddesses, then they can begin to have personhood, but they may or may not. Still, though, they might have this autonomy. Again, it depends on definitions, how we're going to draw the lines between these words.

When we talk about the autonomy of self and other—that element of the imaginal, the autonomy of both self and other, both self and the imaginal object, the beloved other—let's just linger for a while on the sense of the autonomy of self. This is quite an important one and sometimes a tricky one for some people at different stages in their life and in their practice.

An integral and important aspect of imaginal practice is that the self retains a sense of autonomy. We're not being taken over or possessed or losing our sense of choice or will or discernment by the image. Nothing like that is certainly not being encouraged. Nothing like that is really going on.

When I talked about anchoring the other day—that an image has this sense of depth, that sense of possessing other levels or emanating from other levels, and that being able to provide us with an anchor and so keep us stable in regards to the vicissitudes of life. The anchor is like a kind of root as well, like a tree. Part of the function of the roots of the tree is to keep it stable, to keep it upright, to stop it getting blown over by the wind. So we can talk at times, and I have used the phrase at times, of being rooted in the divine, or rooted in the angelic, rooted in that dimensionality, rooted in the angelic dimension or in the archetype.

But that root, or being rooted that way and anchored that way, doesn't mean an inflexibility there. We're not pegged to the spot and immobile while something else has the autonomy and the mobility and we are being done to solely there. We still retain the autonomy of self there. That means freedom. Our freedom is there to a large extent, meaning we can choose how to practice, when to practice, when to get up from practice, what to do in practice, our pacing, our pausing. We're not stuck somewhere in this kind of anchoring and rooting.

There are all the gifts of a kind of anchoring and rooting, but not a kind of frozen subjugation, immobility, imprisonment. As I said, this is quite important for some people, perhaps given their history, given their psychology, for all kinds of reasons.

What do we mean? People use that word autonomy in terms of psychology. They use it in different psychologies quite differently, in different ways. I think in imaginal practice, autonomy, what we mean is—as I said, it's related to the two-ness, so it involves some sense of the distinctness, the two-ness, the differentiation of self and other, self and imaginal object, self and beloved erotic other, whatever that is, human—

divine or whatever. So it is based on that differentiation, but also, as I said, the autonomy of the self—some sense of the distinctness of self and other at a certain level, at least even if one knows the oneness—and an ability of the self to assent or dissent to contact.

With the image, we can refuse contact at any point if we want. We can stop it, we can turn away, we can do something else, we can engage in another practice, we can get up. So the ability of the self is retained to assent or dissent to contact or engagement with an imaginal figure, or to the duty.

This is an important fact as well. Duty often comes—we talk about it—there's a limit to the kind of freedom that we get with the imaginal because of the burden of duty. But the duty is also something that we retain autonomy with. We can say no to a duty. We can say no to part of a duty. We can say no to a certain manifestation of a duty. So this retention of our capacity to discern and to choose, to assent or dissent—this is what we mean by autonomy in the context of imaginal practice.

Autonomy is with respect to the aspects of relationship with the other which feel or are soul-making. So it's very specific. We're talking about what's the relationship with not just the imaginal figure, but particularly those aspects of the image that feel or that are sensed as soul-making. And there's autonomy in relation to those. So we're not just swept up and kind of catapulted willy-nilly and beyond our will into some possession or imprisonment.

Sometimes in modern psychology or some spiritual circles, autonomy is used in a much more absolute and general way. So we're being quite specific here in what we mean by it.

But just to make a point about the way we can be influenced by—I touched on this the other day—the way we can be influenced by what are the current popular or dominant psychological paradigms. So when we think about what does it mean to have, in general, a sense of healthy autonomy of self, I wonder, or I want to point out again, that that sense or model of what is a healthy autonomy of self is culturally and historically contingent. It's an idea, in a sense, a model given to us by whatever culture or subcultures we move in.

And you only have to look back in history or look to other contemporary cultures or even subcultures to see that what perhaps you and I might share as a kind of almost automatic sense of what's involved in a

healthy autonomy in our psychology is very contingent. The whole way we tend to feel ourselves or the way we kind of conceive of the self and feel it. And included in that is our sense of what it means to be a healthy self psychologically.

There's a case, and it has been made by others, there's a case that self—the way we feel and conceive it now, and the emphasis we give it, and the models we have of what a healthy one looks like—is actually a kind of secular, liberal, capitalist, Western, modern construction. What happens if we acknowledge that? Can we bring that acknowledgement into our understanding of soul-making dharma? So we're not assuming a kind of unquestionable truth about self in general.

As I said, just have to think back or do a little research into the self-concept or the idea of self in, say, medieval Europe before the Protestant Reformation, before the rise of capitalism and individualism and all that, or in aboriginal cultures, or Japan, even in the first half of the twentieth century. Very different, and with that a different idea about autonomy and psychological health and relational health. What is it to have my autonomy in this relationship? And some of that, we have to say, is culturally conditioned. Some of that cultural conditioning, of course, will creep into the soul-making dharma. Of course it will.

It's interesting to track Sartre's development of his thinking. In his late thought, he had this Marxist ideal of merging, the individual merging into and identifying with the group. So it was almost like losing one's autonomy. And that was his ideal there. So all these different ideals. And what is autonomy in a consumerist world of saturation with advertising? Am I really autonomous when I'm being fed all these messages that I can't help being influenced by?

So that's a little bit of an aside, but we're mostly wanting to talk about autonomy in a very specific way in regards to images and working with images and soul-making practice.

What does this mean, autonomy? We could almost say it overlaps with the element of twoness. But the word itself—autonomy—is from autonomos, two Greek words. So auto meaning self, and nomos meaning law. So it means self-governing and self-choosing. We retain this, or we develop this capacity if it needs developing, but actually we retain it—this autonomy, this capacity to choose what we do, when we do, how much we do.

in imaginal relationship.

So it's possible to exercise this capacity of our own, of the self's autonomy. And for some people, that's actually a really, really important stage. There might be all kinds of wonderful images flying around and visiting, all kinds of openings, and it's not to say one can't go with that and explore those, but again, it doesn't have to be linear. Somewhere along the line, for some people, there needs to be a kind of shoring up and reassuring oneself of the aspect of the self's autonomy.

So, for example, within an imaginal relationship, within an imaginal constellation, what do I go with? My sense of—I can—I need to have a sense that I can choose what aspect to go with, that I can say no, that I

can slow the whole thing down and go at my pace or go faster or whatever, that I can pause the whole thing. And so actually practising that with an image—with some people I've worked with, it's helpful for them for me to kind of help them do that as we work with an image until they internalize it a bit more. In some instances, the image is actually helping them do that, interestingly, very beautifully.

That practice, of course, one can do in a retreat, in a soul-making retreat. And of course, going back, despite what I said about cultural conditioning, we could say, we could adopt the view—the popular view—that's actually part of healthy and fertile human relationships, to retain that capacity, to do all that in relationship, in the moment, or at least after a little bit, say, "Oh, hold on, I lost my autonomy there, or I wasn't in touch with what I wanted or what I needed," and to point that out, go back and redo something.

Sometimes it's a question of exercising it. I don't think I'll speak about it now, but maybe when, if I talk about dyads, I will say a little bit, I hope, about the actual practice of what we call tunas, or sometimes we call it balance of attention, because that's very connected with this, obviously. And there's some—it's a really helpful practice for many people, and quite, despite how simple it sounds, it's actually quite challenging. And there's some things that can help there. Really, really worth practicing with that, what we call tunas practice or balance of attention practice. We'll come back to that later.

But one can exercise in the ways that I just described. One can also just recognize that one's autonomy is still there. So even, as I said, when it seems like an image is very powerful or kind of exerts a kind of claim or gives us an honour or gives us a duty, we can actually, even within all that, at the same time, almost paradoxically perhaps—not quite a paradox, but—we can recognise that we still have autonomy.

So, for example, when I gave that example of the claim of the God of music that it had on me, the power that it had on my life. There's that vulnerability there. There's the recognition of that claim and the autonomy of the image and the power of the image in my life. But I still have autonomy. I can choose what to do with that claim and that pull. I can choose how to relate to it. I can choose how much to explore it and in what ways to explore it.

So sometimes we shore up and, as I said, reassure ourselves of our own autonomy, of ourselves' autonomy in relation to an image, just by recognising it. Again, there's so much about imaginal practice that's—it sometimes needs doing this, doing that, pulling this here, yanking that, make more of this, open that. And sometimes it's just a matter of recognizing something. And in recognizing, in noticing some aspect or some element, it amplifies it. And that's the case too with our own sense of our autonomy.

But this tunas, and also the double autonomy of both of self and other, this allows and opens the eros. As we said, eros and tunas, they're going to be connected and implicit in each other. And as we've said right from the beginning in all these soul-making teachings, the eros inseminates, it fertilizes the psyche, meaning the whole sense of the image, what we're sensing with soul, and also the logos, the ideation that we have, the concepts that we have. So the tunas is important to allow the kind of—I don't know if we've got the principal sort of driver or catalyst or spark or engine of the whole soul-making dynamic, the eros.

So let's say a little bit about that connection there.

Someone came in for an interview some time ago and reported an image of a big woman, a huge, large woman. I think she had lots of arms, I can't remember. Like Avalokiteshvara, like Kuan Yin, well, Avalokiteshvara. And the image was of this yogi sitting in this big woman's lap. And she asked herself, she was reporting on her practice, and she said, "What kind of—" so she was experimenting and exploring the elements, the nodes a little bit, and she said, "Well, what kind of love do I have for her? What kind of love do I have for this big woman who's holding me in her lap, I'm resting in her lap?"

And the answer came: lusty love. And so there was lust, in this case, the sexual eros there. Remember, eros doesn't necessarily need to be sexual. Our definition is broader than that, but it includes sexual eros. So in this case, lusty love. And the yogi went with that a little bit and started licking the goddess's belly, and then her breasts and sucking her breasts. And there was a lot of sexual energy that came with that.

At that point she got a little worried. There was considerable sexual energy present, and it concerned her somewhat. We're not accustomed to such experiences, certainly not within a meditative context where we're often taught that such energies represent defilement. We've explored these themes many times before.

So she became concerned and pulled back. Then, with wisdom and skillful practice—recognizing the concern, exercising the self's autonomy—she paused. She chose to return in her own time, but with a slightly different attitude, a different intention.

She returned to the goddess and sought out the divinity and duty present there. In other words, she focused on other nodes rather than becoming swept up in the growing sexual energy. This was a very skillful response and an exercise of her own autonomy.

In sensing the goddess and exploring the divinity and duty, she noticed that the goddess wants to and does nourish. That's what the goddess does—it's her fulfillment. This goddess exists for the sake of nourishing. So in a way, part of the duty becomes opening to that nourishment, opening to the suckling nourishment from the goddess.

I asked her in the interview if the goddess could be present now, and she could. Then I asked how her body feels, how the practitioner's body feels, and she said, "Very open in the chest." This was all quite clear—you could sense that openness.

Then I asked, "Can you experience the goddess's experience of her own body? Can you enter into, get a feel for the goddess's experience of her own body?" She could, and she felt the openness of that body that was open to give, to nourish—where the milk could flow, the nourishment, the elixir could flow, the giving could flow. The openness, the fearlessness that the goddess felt in herself, in her body, the joy, the abundance of her generous nourishing of others and of beings. The goddess was full of these qualities, and by entering into that experience, feeling into it, resonating with it, the practitioner got a direct taste of

that.

I sensed with this yogi that those qualities—that openness, fearlessness, power and joy and generous, abundant nourishing of others—might be mirrors of this yogi's being that were perhaps only inchoately, only vaguely, only dimly sensed, or only in their initial seed phase. Part of the duty here for this yogi might be to mirror and echo that goddess in her life with all that abundance, power, joy, fearlessness, giving, nourishment, openness.

A kind of angel out ahead then, calling this practitioner to manifest something, calling them to echo the angel, calling them to that refraction in one's life and finding what that might mean—creating, discovering what that might mean.

So I lightly suggested something like that, but in different words. Sometimes you feel it's better for people to discover things themselves. Sometimes it's okay to point things out. Sometimes there's a middle way.

But again, we have the eros fertilizing this whole process. That means we have to tolerate eros and be okay with eros. In this case, tolerate and be okay with and respond wisely and creatively to sexual eros and sexual energy that was quite intense and full.

When we talk about the autonomy of the image—so there's the autonomy of the self, and there's the autonomy of the image, this double-aspected element—the autonomy of the image is not in contradiction to a sense of interconnectedness and even a knowing of oneness.

I have a friend who, for quite some years now, senses her ovaries with soul. There's a sensing with soul of her ovaries. They become alive, dimensional, with their own intelligence, with their own desire, with their own sensibility. They become autonomous. We've talked about this. She's reported it in different ways. I'm sure I've only heard a fraction of it.

She has a soul sense of her ovaries as deities. They have their own sense of things as autonomous entities—how do they experience things, what's their response to things, what's their sensibility. They know their own autonomy, and they know their own power. Power and autonomy are related, of course—we go back to the autonomous as self-governing.

But they know that, her sense was, they know that at the same time and naturally mixed with their knowing of their embeddedness.

So the autonomy is not, as I said, in contradiction to their knowing their embeddedness, their interconnectedness. When we were talking at that time, she was talking about their sense of the ovaries existing in a kind of ocean, an imaginal ocean. And so they had a sense of their own power, their own autonomy, but also their embeddedness and interconnectedness within that imaginal ocean. And also their interconnectedness with what they are in relationship with, whatever that is at the time, sensing this, sensing that. They are organs of perception, instruments of perception, soul instruments. And, for

example, their dependence on sperm if there wants to be conception, etc. So autonomy of image is not in contradiction—it can include, just like self's autonomy can include a sense of knowing oneness at the same time. We don't lose that autonomy. Neither does the image.

One aspect of the autonomy of the image, if we're relating it to eros as well, is that there is this anteros—A-N-T-E-R-O-S. I think I mentioned it maybe in one talk; I can't remember when. In classical Greek mythology, anteros is one of the erotes, this gang of semi-divine beings. Eros is the principal one. Pothos we've talked about as part of our definition of eros. Himeros and anteros. Maybe some others, I can't remember. But anteros is the god of requited love. In other words, the returning of love. So, actually in our definition, he's the god of requited eros, the returning of eros.

So that's the point I want to make: that there's not just love and being loved; there's eros and being the object of eros. We have emphasized more in the teachings the eros from the self to the beloved other, to the imaginal object, to whatever we're sensing with soul. But again, as you get used to the imaginal terrain and the eyes, the sensibilities get enhanced to notice more there, one will begin to recognize: oh, not only does this imaginal other love me back in very particular ways that I may need to get used to or may not notice at first, it also has eros for me.

And that's eros, remember—so the love might be bigger than we usually think of love, but when we talk about eros, our definition, our conception of eros, it's more than being loved. It kind of may be implicit in it, the love, but it's more than that. So the eros flows both ways, and we can recognize ourselves as objects of eros, gazed at, related to with eros by the imaginal other, by whatever we're sensing with soul. And we can open to that. And what is it to feel oneself as beloved erotic other for this beloved erotic other?

So that eros is not necessarily sexual. It might be, but it might be just eros in a non-sexual sense. Either way, it's going to be healing. I think I mentioned this—I can't remember the context—on the last retreat, the roots into the ground of soul, to really know oneself as a beloved erotic, an object of beloved eros, does something to the being and to the soul sense and to the way we relate to ourselves. We can start relating to ourselves with eros. And that's more than love, which is more than metta. So all these are important: metta, love, and eros.

But one of the implicit dimensions of the autonomy of the image is the anteros, the fact that they can have their own eros for us. And in recognizing that, in tuning to it, in opening to it, in assenting to it over time, that's going to be healing the soul at all kinds of levels. Healing is not even the right word—opening the soul, opening the sense of self, opening the sense of existence at all kinds of levels. Maybe sexual, often not sexual; doesn't matter.

And if we come back to this relationship of eros and desire and autonomy, and we talk about the self's autonomy here—again, I really want to just keep mentioning this caveat about cultural views—but we would tend to think of an autonomous self, someone who has a sense of their own autonomy, as also included in that means a relationship with their own desire, so that they know themselves with respect to

desire and their eros.

Now, old maxim from Athens or whatever, the ancient philosophers, maybe even before that: know thyself. Included in that must be the knowing of oneself in relationship to desire. So again, that's quite a popular cultural view nowadays that may not be shared by all cultures, but certainly for the soul-making dharma in the larger sense, it's important—this whole journey and exploration and opening to desire and beginning to understand it more, beginning to unpack some of the constrictions or shapes from other factors and relational factors over the years with it, beginning to unpack that and understand it and validate our desire and discern different kinds of desire and healthy desire.

And that's part of knowing oneself and the importance of that. So if I don't know what goes on for me in terms of regarding passion, desire, longing, goals, wishes, my relationship to them, my view of them, how or whether I can give myself to them fully, what is ego, what is deeper desire, then I don't really know myself. And my life—because I don't know well, I haven't opened out and explored and questioned those areas and those thrusts of my life, my heart's desire and all that's involved with that—I don't really know myself. And my life will be prevented from being as full as it can be.

Or the gifts that I potentially can put out into the world, bestow, offer to others through my being, through my actions, through my speech—they also won't be as fully able to be born into the world, to be given into the world. And what else are we here for? What else are we here for but that?

But this is hard, in the sense that some proportion of people, and even some proportion of people who are attracted to soul-making dharma, all that has gotten very jammed up or confused or limited or constricted or it's painful. And sometimes people have told me, "Whenever you ask, 'What do you want, what do you really want?' or that kind of question, it just freezes me, drives me crazy." As I said, there might be real cultural conditioning going on. Certain cultures, even contemporary cultures, don't put a lot of emphasis on individual desire, personal desire, knowing that, differentiating it, pursuing it.

Of course, that's changing with the sort of westernization of global culture. But still, that cultural conditioning operates for many people. And there's dharma conditioning as well, which we've talked about before—conditioning that tends to denigrate desire, or at least doesn't really explore its full range of colors in the psychology and in the being, and the ramifications of all that.

So yes, this work with desire is really important, and it's part of our autonomy as human beings. There are all kinds of cultural factors and individual factors and conditioning at play. When we explore this aspect—our relationship with desire, beginning to understand our desire—that whole realm is huge. We're really talking about a vast subject, one that forms a large strand, a weave of threads within the whole subject of our sense of our own autonomy.

There are certain things worth pointing out and exploring in this relationship with desire. When we talk about desire, it's always connected to other things. Obviously it's connected to an object, but it's always

situated in a field of conditions that shape the whole field of that desire and our relationship with it, influencing what then ensues.

Let me mention four aspects. First, a desire is what we might call open-ended or not open-ended. "I want to eat dinner" or "I want to eat an apple" is not open-ended. If I can find an apple and dinner, I eat them and it's done. But when we've opened up the notion of the path and awakening in soul-making dharma as being open-ended, then the desire for soul-making can be open-ended. The desire for awakening becomes open-ended. It's not the case that I reach something and it's finished—it continues to unfold.

Whether a desire is open-ended or not makes a big difference to how we feel about it, how we relate to it, how we situate the self with it and view ourselves in relationship to the desire. It affects the whole energy we bring to it, the stamina, the pacing, all kinds of things. The whole way we see our life and our narrative. So it's quite an important distinction.

Second, a desire exists in a context or field of conditions, inner or outer, that make it feasible or not, likely or not, to achieve whatever that desired goal is, or to move toward that desire. What is it to have a desire that's actually achievable? What is it to have a desire that's not achievable? How do we relate to these two differently? What's wise there?

Third, a desire meets an internal pattern. This is complex and often tricky and often not fully conscious. For example: feeling lack or a habitual sense of lack, expecting disappointment, expecting to be frustrated in one's desires, quickly disallowing or not allowing desires, judging desires—or the opposites of all those patterns. These conditions around the desire have a huge effect on what unfolds.

If I have a desire and almost subconsciously I'm expecting disappointment, or I'm judging it, or I don't even allow it to become fully conscious and experience it, that shapes everything. It has a huge effect on what unfolds and whether the desire is felt or experienced as clarifying, empowering, healing, freeing. We touched on this when we talked about the opening to the current of desire practice—a lot hinges on the conception of the desire, and whether I can shift that conception if needed, out of perhaps my habitual way of viewing that desire as suspicious.

All these internal patterns are usually habitual and will influence greatly what unfolds around the desire, with the desire, from the desire, in relationship to desire—whether it all becomes dukkha in various ways. This is part of understanding ourselves: What's around the desire? What assumptions, conceptions, inclinations, inhibitions? Which of those are habitual patterns and which pertain just to this situation, this desire? It's all part of this journey of understanding, of knowing oneself in regard to our desire—if you like, healing our relationship with desire.

Fourth is whether a desire is authentic or not. Sometimes people say, "I want to practice emptiness, I need to practice emptiness." But actually, to realize emptiness is not really a soul desire for them. It's not really coming authentically from the depths of their soul, as a soul longing. Rather, either they've been

indoctrinated that it's important, or the relationship with emptiness practice becomes just an attempt by the ego to measure up, to prove itself, to succeed, not to fail, to achieve this or that stage of practice. That's a very different thing than a soul desire—the ego's desperate, miserable attempt to measure up is very different from an actual soul desire.

So again, part of knowing ourselves, which is part of...

knowing that, recognizing that, discerning that. It's really, really important.

But this journey with desire, this journey of healing our relationship with desire and eros, is fundamental to soul-making dharma. It's really important. And sometimes complex.

Sometimes people hear these teachings on eros, perhaps references to sexuality, and they hear just a fragment. They might approach me and say, "I want to heal my eros, I want to heal my sexuality. In recent years I've shut down my eros, my heart, my sexuality. I hear you speak about eros and sexuality in relation to imaginal practice. I want to use imaginal practice to reinvigorate and resurrect my sexuality."

But this approach can create too much pressure. What's often absent is the element of fullness of intention. They've heard talk about eros and sexuality, and that becomes their sole focus. They may even have preconceived ideas about what healed eros and sexuality would look like. But they're not approaching soul-making practice and imaginal practice with the primary, full intention of soul-making and everything that includes—which may include healing, and often does include healing in sexuality, but encompasses so much more.

When the intention shrinks to "I want to heal my sexuality," something goes awry. The person approaches imaginal practice with this narrow focus. An image arises, and they try to be sexual with it. But then something unexpected happens—again, this is part of the image's autonomy.

I'm trying to work with this single view, this single intention, not the fullness of intention, not the fullness of the scope of soul-making with all its range and depth and meaning. And the image simply won't cooperate. Perhaps the image pulls out a sword and plunges it into her heart, shocking the practitioner and throwing them completely off course.

Better, I think, to let the emotions of the dukkha—the feeling of being shut down, the worry that perhaps my eros is gone forever—be felt fully. That sense that something which used to be alive, which I used to enjoy, that sexuality and heart connection which once flowed like water into my life, lubricating and moistening my soul, may have disappeared forever. To feel that dukkha of dryness, of closure, that sense of concern.

Be with that. Be in the crucible with that suffering and let the image arise from there. The image that emerges may not be sexual at all, but it addresses the more pertinent issue. It might be sexual, but often it's not. It's arising from that sense of dryness. What image emerges from that dukkha when I can be with

it in the right way?

Or if you choose to deliberately explore a sexual image, again, let the sense of soul-making lead you and respond to that. Stay and linger with what feels soul-making, not what the mind thinks needs to happen for healing. So much depends on not buying into what the mind habitually thinks and assumes, and instead trusting the soul read, the soul sense, the soul resonances in the energy body—those feelings of resonance and mirroring and echoing and beauty. Linger with that and resonate with that, rather than getting too narrow with healing intentions.

There can be such profound healing that emerges from soul-making practice and imaginal practice, but it needs to be approached in the right way. Then it's included as part of something much bigger—that fuller intention, that element of fullness of intention.

It's interesting—sometimes someone comes for an interview and they're very clear about their intention for healing their sexuality, perhaps because of abuse or trauma or various aspects of history. And sometimes that opens up beautifully and proves very healing through the imaginal. They come with clear intention for healing that aspect of their being, and it does work.

And in other instances it really doesn't work as I described just now. What's the difference between—why does one person, bearing that intention for healing her sexuality, why does the work with image that comes out of that become fruitful, both soulful and healing areas of her sexuality, and another person not?

I wonder about this, and I'm thinking of two specific examples. I won't go into the details, but with the example where it worked, I feel that in part it worked because her intention to heal her sexuality was really set in a much larger intention for soul-making, unlike the first person where it really didn't work—it just jammed up and weird stuff happened that threw her off. She didn't have much experience with soul-making. She just heard a little bit about it, thought, "Oh, this sounds kind of familiar. I recognize this." But she hadn't really taken on the whole—which I realize is an elaborate and complicated and very wordy set of teachings.

Whereas this second person actually had worked with image and sort of fallen in love with imaginal practice and soul-making dharma, and had so much richness there. She loved soul-making and was aware of that. So even when she came and said, "I'm bringing this thing about my sexuality and something needs healing there," explaining about past trauma, her intention to heal her sexuality was set in this much larger intention for soul-making that had become kind of implicit for her, or kind of normal for her over her years of practice with soul-making.

It was also the case with the second person where it did flower beautifully in both a healing sense and a soul-making sense, that she had already had access to a particular sexual image of a feminine being she gave a certain name to, and this image had visited her, and she had worked with her very beautifully over a couple of years, I think. So that image was easily accessible, and the elements were easily activated

already there in relationship to that image, and that helped her meet the pain and the wounding around sexuality, whereas the first person I referred to actually had no such image or imaginal experience to call upon, nor really an understanding of or working familiarity with the whole imaginal paradigm.

But it's tricky, all this, because I certainly think—if I think about what's my intention when someone comes for an interview and there's some dukkha—and it's often the case that I have an intention for healing. So sometimes it seems that it works relatively well to seek out an image with the intention primarily of healing something. As I said, even when I'm working as a teacher in interviews, someone might come with something and we're working imaginally, but we're really addressing dukkha, and I can tell that my intention is to some large extent to heal whatever pain they're in or whatever pattern of contraction or confusion or whatever it is through the image.

So, helping facilitate or create a space where, for example, the self can become image, as we talked about, the self almost becoming other, and then in relation with her now—that self-image as other—then in relationship with the self, being slow and patient and carefully working on being seen by that image, not forcing to be other or different. The appreciation, the love from that image can also become eros, as we talked about, the eros from that image towards her, even towards her sense of contractedness, towards the contracted self, towards the frozen or jammed up self, towards the withdrawing self, the fearful self fearful of how things might—how she might sabotage, or this incapacity or confusion or contraction might sabotage a new relationship. And the image coming into relationship with that fear and that contraction and that self.

And so there's the imaginal work, but I can tell that in my mind, at least, a large portion of the intention in that moment is for healing and relief of dukkha. Healing, I would say, is a better word in this instance. But again, I wonder if it's okay and helpful only when there is already some degree of experience with imaginal images and a larger commitment to soul-making—that is, the fullness of intention—as a context in the one intending or leading the practice. In that case, me, if I'm guiding someone. Or the second person I referred to before in relation to her sexuality, in her kind of being with herself and leading her own practice.

But it might also be that, if we're talking about teaching now, it might also be that the one being led needs to have some love of soul-making, some experience with imaginal images and soul-making. But even that, I'm not sure. All kinds of things are possible. But as a general rule, I think healing goes better when there's the fullness of intention. It's more powerful, richer, more multi-dimensional.

So I guess we're on to that element of fullness of intention now. A really, really important element. Strictly speaking, I think when we say fullness of intention, it means the intention for soul-making is paramount. It's the most primary intention. But the phrase "fullness of intention" means it can include other intentions. So it can include, for example, the intention to heal this or that aspect of my being or history or whatever it is. But in a way, the intention for soul-making is in itself the largest intention.

Intention for soul-making. Because we've said that soul-making is in the service of expanding our senses of sacredness, a person might think, "Oh, an intention for sensing sacredness is actually the same as the intention for soul-making." It may or may not be. But it may be that an intention for more sense of sacredness may kind of unwittingly, subconsciously imply a kind of uniform and universal perception or sense of sacredness. Maybe a person doesn't even realize that. And that uniform and universal perception or sense of sacredness spreads to more and more things or activities. That's different than a potentially endlessly expanding range of kinds and flavors of sacredness.

Do you understand the difference? I might have a sense of, "I see everything as God," or "I see everything as holy awareness or cosmic love or whatever it is," and I want to see if I can kind of spread that over everything. But that's different than the range of kinds and flavors of sacredness endlessly expanding, endlessly proliferating, subdividing, complexifying, becoming, showing varied faces.

Sometimes when we have an intention to be mindful everywhere, for example, which is a great intention, and to be mindful everywhere and in all activities—so whether I'm going shopping, whether I'm shitting, whether I'm surfing the internet or whatever, can there be mindfulness there?—but the perceptions that that will allow, just being mindful in all those activities and kind of spreading the sense of mindfulness...

they will be conditioned to arise by that attitude of mindfulness, and they will be limited in terms of the range and diversity. So yes, you'll begin to see impermanence, you'll begin to see a certain level of not-self, you'll have the kind of perception of "this just as it is"—just this thing or that thing or that experience just as it is. You'll have the experience of sensations, the atomistic nature of things, and so forth. But the range of kinds of experience are limited. Certain experiences simply won't open up from there.

In a similar way, if I narrow down my idea of what sacredness is—often unconsciously limiting what kinds of sacredness are available to perception—and that becomes my intention for more sense of sacredness, then that's a smaller intention than the intention for soul-making. Soul-making, by virtue of the way the dynamic works, will constantly show us ever more kinds and flavors and faces of sacredness, rather than the same sacredness in more and more places.

So there's a kind of openness to surprise in a way—to new kinds of experiences—in the fullness of intention that goes with the ride of soul-making, that goes with the process, that goes with the assent to the soul-making dynamic.

Sometimes I've wondered whether this element of fullness of intention is actually quite rare. It seems to me quite a rare thing to come across in someone—not only as a way of conceiving and really feeling or intending the totality of one's path and practice, but also at any kind of juncture or moment or stretch of practice or path.

So often the wish is just to be rid of dukkha—very understandably, really understandably. So often this wish is given ascendancy, gains primacy in the face and the flow of life and relationships and friendships

and work and our psychological patterns. And of course, sometimes there really is a lot of dukkha, and it's totally understandable. Sometimes that dukkha feels like it has a really long and seemingly intractable history, and it's difficult to bear.

But even when there's actually not that much great suffering, it still seems to be quite rare for this fullness of intention, rather than a kind of more narrow intention to be rid of dukkha. So I don't know if that's the case, but I sometimes wonder about it.

The good news, or a piece of good news, is that we can always—like the other elements—ignite this one, support its opening. We can just remind ourselves: can I open to a fuller intention, a wider intention, a more unfathomable intention? Because part of the surprise of the journey of soul-making is its unfathomability. I don't know where it ends. I can't even peer into its depths and its distant possibilities. I don't know what's going to open next.

But we can remind ourselves, we can support—as I said—support the ignition, the opening, the activation of that node. And that really makes a big difference. So it might be rare, but it's a very powerful thing when it comes online, this fullness of intention. It makes a big difference.

And as I said, it's labile—it's stuff that moves and that we can have a say in as part of our autonomy in deciding: can I support something different here? If the intention has—I recognize the intention has got locked or closed or narrowed or fixated—can I wield my skill and responsiveness and exercise my art in practice to actually allow a fuller intention? That's always possible because these things are malleable and labile.

It was a while ago I was working in an interview with someone—I can't remember if she realized it or if I gently pointed it out, but not important—but at some point she realized that she was intent on what she wanted from the image. That's why right at the beginning of teaching imaginal practice, I stress this thing: "What do you want from me?" Asking the image, what do you want from me?

So often in so many psychologies and even spiritualities that use imagination, there's a sense of "what can I get?" We do get lots from the image, but when we're talking about relationship with image, it's a very different relationship when we're not primarily relating to the image as "what can I get from it."

So she realized at some point that she was so intent on what she wanted from the image that she forgot to ask what the image wants. And in recognizing that, in realizing that, she actually felt some guilt—which is interesting. But luckily, there wasn't too much reified self around that guilt. Guilt can get very stuck and very jammed up, and it involves a quite solid, contracted, reified sense of self. It was more what I call remorse. There was a softness in it, and the self wasn't so reified.

But actually it was still important, I think—again, back to these issues of pacing, autonomy, and so forth. In this case, I was just encouraging her: "Okay, don't rush at that point. Don't rush. Can we linger and feel that remorse? It's not really guilt—it's remorse about being so intent on what I want that I forget to ask

what the image wants, or find out what the image wants. Linger without rushing. Linger with that sense of remorse."

Feel it in the heart, feel it in the body—and she felt it behind her eyes, she said. And as she did that—so we're back again to the importance of the crucible, of being with the emotion, especially if there's a difficult emotion.

It needs addressing, it needs including, it needs working with, it needs a certain kind of relating to. And in so doing, everything softened. The energy body softened, but it softened everything in the imaginal relationship, including the perception of the image and the whole constellation.

When she was able to do that, then the self actually became an image, as we've talked about. Remember, self, other, and world all start to become involved in the imaginal constellations. We talked about that with the fountain image—the stone fountain, the stone basin. Instead of a real self in relationship, or a reified, contracted self in relationship with the imaginal other, the self became image as well. That's part of the softening, the liquefying of the whole process.

Then, interestingly, in relation to her eros and desire, the imaginal self's eros and desire was recognized as divine. As I mentioned, you don't have to rush this or make it happen or force it or push something onto the next stage, but this is exactly what I would expect. There's an inevitable, organic unfolding—in its own time, in its own pacing. Naturally, if we don't get in the way, there's a natural inclusion of the different elements of our being. They become imaginal. They gain dimension, they gain divinity.

So the imaginal self's eros and desire was then sensed as divine. And of course, the imaginal self is me and not me. The qualities and aspects of the imaginal self are me and not me. So it's not me, but it's also me. So it's my eros and desire that also begins to feel and be sensed as divine. She had a sense: "I am participating in divinity and in the divine eros."

With that, then, the craving that she felt before in relation to the image—which was also related to a craving in life—the craving subsided because the eros was allowed to flourish. In this case, the eros itself was allowed to become an erotic imaginal object, with the sense of divinity and the whole constellation feeling very soothing. So there's eros, but there's a different sense of the eros, a whole other dimension to the sense of the eros. We've touched on this before, and the importance of this. The agitation and contraction that she felt earlier was soothed.

So there's a kind of healing, if you like, in that moment in relation to what was going on. But more long-term—probably even more significant, definitely even more significant—is that we could say it is a part of insouling our eros and desire. The deepest healing is an insouling. Her sense then—it might have been the first time, or it might be the first time in a whole series of experiences—where she gets to taste the divinity, the dimensionality and divinity of her desire and her eros. Her desire and her eros become ensouled. That is a profound healing of one's relationship with one's eros and desire, and with oneself,

with one's own mind and heart and soul.

So as I said at the beginning, you can get a sense from all this—and probably most of you at this point have your own practice—of just the gifts and the beauties and the surprises that open up when we take care of the relationship with images and with what we sense with soul. When we open up those possibilities, when we care for the relationship and we care for the elements and all that's involved—so much gift, so much blessing, so much that is wondrous.

Thank you for listening.

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