

The Crucible
Four Circles, Four Parables of Stone and Light
Rob Burbea
May 26, 2019
<https://dharmafeed.org/teacher/210/talk/58783/>

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 an other, 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, if you like, are transubstantiated through the process, which, of course, is central to what alchemy [is], or one way we could see what alchemy is, or was. And so if we talk in those terms, the art of, the alchemy of imaginal practice, etc., then we can perhaps look into analogies of the alchemical vessel, etc., 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, as it would break down pretty quick, 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? What kind of, if you like, if we use 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, tending to, the image, or the sense, or the perception, or the soulmaking transformation that comes? So we could use either of those metaphors, analogies – either the alchemy or the sort of 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, as I said last night, get into more detail about some of the aspects of skill and art in these practices. So one of the pieces that I really want to return to and emphasize in later talks of this series is the importance of the relationship to our emotions. That 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, etc., then the crucible cannot heat up enough to ferment and to catalyse the alchemical process. If, on the other hand, I'm just lost in an emotion, without mindfulness, without any sense of a kind of skilful 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 sort of range of helpful relationship to emotions that allows imaginal practice and sensing with soul, of course, has to do with sensing in the energy body, etc., that we've talked about (and the energy body is involved in more than just emotions, but). This is really important. I want to return to it, as I said, in later talks, but just say a few things about that and a few things 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 really kind of in his element there, asked me a question in an interview. He came

in, and one of the things he asked or reported was, “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 also they have a big effect, you know. But then they’re gone. Whereas it *used* to be,” he reported, “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?”

So 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. So what occurred to me was 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, I don’t know, 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 (I’m going to come back to this; this is a really important point) – it may be that when there is not a sustained emotional challenge in one’s life, it may be that images don’t actually ‘need’ to last a long time. Let’s put it that way, 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 for us in relationship to those emotions and out of those emotions, if we relate to that emotion the right way.

We don’t need to be with them a long time, necessarily. Some images *do* last a long time, some less, but it might be that 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 cosmopoesis, cosmopoeses that we experience when an imaginal sense spreads to the whole world, or the whole environment. There’s a sensing with soul of one’s whole environment, not just of one object, intrapsychic or extrapsychic. Or it could be one object, sensing with soul, extrapsychic object sensing with soul. For instance, the garden becomes a deva 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-*jhānic* state or well-being, etc., and *that* is the emotion, so to speak, that’s sustaining, that’s part of sustaining, if we use that language, this/that perception.

So that was one reflection that occurred to me. A second is – and again, it’s something we’ll come back to – an image needs us to tune to whatever are its most soulmaking aspects. Sometimes, again, we get hung up on the visual, and the clarity of the visual or something, or we’re demanding some visual clarity or something like that, but that may not be at all what’s most soulmaking, really where the juice is, where the life of the image is, and the vitality of the image is. And there’s not a formula, obviously, for what is most soulmaking. 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 soulmaking, if we’re actually focusing on something else, some other aspect of the image, the image will lose its energy and its cohesion – for instance, the mind gets distracted, etc. So emotions have a part. They’re an integral part of imaginal practice and sensing with soul.

We could say – and I can’t remember if someone suggested or asked – is vulnerability one of the nodes, perhaps? Is it, for instance, a twenty-ninth node? 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, etc. But let’s explore a little bit this notion of vulnerability. Vulnerability actually

means, from the Latin *vulnera*, a wound. It's a 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 *vulnera*, a wound, can also be an incision, which is also a kind of opening. When there's a cut in the body, there's a kind of opening there, you know? 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 a loss of their autonomy. I do not think that is a real possibility, a real vulnerability of soulmaking 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 behaviour, etc., and they might carry that into *any* relationship – 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: "I actually *do* lose my autonomy, or I seem to." And that fear, if it's there, will hinder the soulmaking. It will actually block the soulmaking dynamic, the eros-psyche-logos dynamic, from expanding and deepening, widening, getting richer, more complicated, etc. Or one might have, for example, a tendency towards merging with another, and in that way not so much being possessed but something like that. Or withdrawing, the opposite, 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 the potential imaginal object or 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 with soul has that kind of danger to it. If there are those fears, or one recognizes, "Oh, I do have these patterns," as I said, 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 twoness 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 intrapsychic image, what is it to be in relationship with another where there's the twoness that is connected and alive? The eros can flow without collapsing into one, without a merging, without a losing myself in the other, or without a withdrawing. And so one can practise 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 soulmaking practice.

There might be – actually, there certainly is – a vulnerability to craving taking over, or something that starts as eros, or some relationship which feels like it's 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. [17:29] The expansion and the opening and life-giving and dimensionalizing, etc., that eros supports, allows, engenders, collapses when the eros collapses to become craving. And that's a definite vulnerability, if you like. Of course craving is *dukkha*, is painful, so there's a kind of vulnerability to the wound of the *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. So that sure, 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 is not present for us but who has become imaginal, and there's a lot of eros, and then that becomes craving. But it's very possible to then reopen that craving so that it becomes eros. 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 skilfully and get back on track.

I suppose there's a vulnerability, too, with sensing with soul, with working with images, there's a kind of vulnerability to my duty to an image, to the sense of the duty that I might have to an image, or to a sense of things when they're sensed with soul, for a number of reasons. 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. And so 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 am loyal to, a loyal servant of in terms of discharging my duty, so to speak, from the imaginal sense, I cannot guarantee that that will be received well, noticed, paid attention to, valued by others in the world. There are, of course, plenty of instances through history where people have done that and it hasn't been valued. But perhaps the value comes 100 years after the person dies – so Van Gogh, or there are countless examples.

But there is that vulnerability. So 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 the human connection, and a frustration of the soul's desire to be seen. Again, I'll return to this. It's quite important, and it's quite contrary to a lot of sort of more popular psychologies that would just put such things in delusion (of course, there is the danger of that, and over-reification), or put them in the categories of ego: "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.

I think, 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 sort of blows us away in the sense that it's actually more than our circuits can handle. I mean, sometimes it's the case that the eros can *feel* more than we can handle. That's true. But I've talked about how to work with that skilfully. And that's a really important part of the art, how to handle a lot of charge, how to develop one's capacity and one's 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 sort of 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, for instance, may *seem* sometimes to ask, 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's mother, at the Annunciation, when the angel Gabriel came and announced to her that she was pregnant, and pregnant with divine life. I think it's in the first chapter of Luke, if I remember. It's probably in the other gospels as well. But she responds to the angel Gabriel when he comes to announce this in the Annunciation, "I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said."¹ 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 was not easy at all, was it? They had to – if you know the stories in the gospel – they had to flee from where they were living, and escape Herod's persecution of newborn infants and his murdering of newborn infants. Her son, Jesus, as you may know, was – it's kind of read between the lines in the gospel – he was regarded as a bastard. Wasn't sure who his father was. Was Joseph actually his father? Don't think so. And of course, in that time, in that culture, that had a huge negative stigma to it, to be a bastard, not to have a father, not to know who one's father was. So Mary, as well as Jesus, obviously, had to deal with that. That was part of her duty, raising a son who was regarded in the community as a bastard and kind of ostracized for that. And then, of course, Jesus is put to death and crucified, and Mary at the foot of the cross, losing her son. So the duty that she assented to, that she opened herself to, "I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said," came at a cost. Really stretched her, we could say, for sure, in human terms, if we look at it that way.

We can also turn this around, though, this question of vulnerability. In this story of the Annunciation from the gospel, and with all these things, and the Bible and all that, it's like, 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, hearing it, reading it completely flatly, where of course it just sounds ridiculous to our modern sensibilities and assumptions, etc.? What if we hear it imaginally? We bring our imaginal sensibility, our poetic sensibility to our religious sensibility, and all the openness that that means, for the heart, for the soul, for the being, for the poetic sense, for the religious sense, for the soul-sense, and all the hermeneutic, the infinite interpretive possibilities that such stories open up, because when we relate to them as images, they become unfathomable. They take on those nodes. They become unfathomable. That means unfathomably deep, unfathomably, always harbouring more possibilities for interpretation, for touching us, for angles of perspective on that story.

But if we read it, listen that way, this beautiful passage from the gospels, you can also say 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?", etc. 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 – and also the angel's – so that God depends on human assent, human perception, and human action. We've touched on that or mentioned that in a number of talks over recent years. There's a Zoharic teaching of how we create God, how God needs us, or somehow that our perceptions, our intentions, our actions, our thoughts, our conceptions are part of allowing and supporting and engendering a harmony in the Godhead. And, even further, sometimes, the Zohar says, it's as if we create God through our attitudes, perceptions, conceptions, acts.

There's also that kind of puzzling passage in the Old Testament where an angel comes to Jacob as he's travelling, as he's on a journey, and an angel comes, I think, in the night, and 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 imaginally? Actually, 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 soulmaking, and sensing with 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, the thigh and the hip. But also blesses him. So those two, in that story, they go together: the blessing from the angel, the blessing from the divine and the wound go together.

And also, the angel then, in blessing him, gives Jacob a new name, and gives him the name Yisrael. There are different interpretations of what Yisrael means, what Israel means. So Philo, the ancient Jewish Platonic philosopher, interpreted the meaning of Israel – *el* is 'God.' *Isra* is 'he or one who sees God,' 'one who sees the divine.' Henry Corbin also follows that interpretation as a meaning for Israel. 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, changes, gives him a new name: one who sees the divine. So again, what happens if we hear such a story with our poetic sensibility, our imaginal sensibility?

We could say, yes, vulnerability is an element of the imaginal in certain ways, and not in other ways, as I tried to explain there. Certainly sensitivity is indispensable as a part of imaginal practice and sensing with soul. We need to be able to be impacted, and we need to be able to develop our subtlety of sensitivity. All this I've touched on before as well. Sometimes what can happen – if we talk again about the vessel or the gestation of images – is something touches us in life, some sense or perception of things, or a physical touch, even, and at the time, we register it and we interact with it or whatever, but later on, maybe a little while later, or sometimes even months later, the memory of it becomes image. So 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, it may be enjoyable and lovely and wonderful, but it's as if sometimes, later, something in the soul is kind of – I don't know what we'd say – 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, whatever it is.

There's no reason, of course, why whatever that was – if we're talking about sex right now – can't be sensed with soul right then, in the moment, during that, whatever it is, that touch or that event. But sometimes, you know, there are other things going on in the heat or the complexity of the moment, or the difficulty of the moment, or all kinds of things; other considerations, other factors prevent it, in that moment, from being sensed with soul. But later it can come back and be a very, very beautiful, very fertile, very powerful image. Someone shared with me a very beautiful story that I asked her permission to share. So I'll relate it to you. It's not sexual, but it's an illustration of this same principle of a memory becoming an image.

So this person, her father was – I don't know exactly what happened to him, but he was in a coma, in a hospital in another country. He was in a coma for a long time, I think two months, even, or more.

And she went there, and got an apartment near the hospital, and every day – she was basically living in the hospital, I think. Maybe sleeping in the apartment, or sometimes sleeping in the hospital. I can't remember. Eventually, after a few months, of course they didn't know what would happen, but eventually 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 just how it was. It's a really slow process of regaining your faculties, etc. And they sort of – what's the word? – control that, that gradual sort of emergence, with drugs and all kinds of other things.

So he was coming out of the coma after a couple of months, very gradually. He couldn't speak at first. He had a tube in his throat. And his arms were tied down in the bed. I don't know why that is; it's part of this sort of gradual, controlled emergence from the coma that they try and guide. So one evening, she was just washing up, getting ready to leave him for the night, for the evening, and with his arms tied down in the bed, he beckoned her over with a sort of minimal motion his wrists were capable of. He sort of beckoned her over repeatedly, repeatedly making a gesture, "Come over." So she was about to go, but she went and put her head close to him to see what he wanted. And when she did that, he kissed her on the forehead. And that was it. She was recounting the whole trip to that city in the other country, and the hospital, etc. It was very stressful dealing with the hospital, and dealing with the family, and the apartment where she had to scramble to get a place. It had lots of problems, etc. So she was completely exhausted when she got back home. And the whole memory of the whole trip was just very difficult. It was a whole difficult period that she got through.

Then, really some months later, she was walking in meditation, doing some walking meditation at Gaia House, and the memory of that kiss to her forehead suddenly came, as a primarily kinaesthetic memory. Again, not necessarily visual. It came primarily kinaesthetically. She kind of felt it on her forehead again. And in that moment (this is 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. Completely different view. Moved her to tears. And just to be clear here, 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's a growth, an extension, an enriching, a complexifying, a dimensionalizing, etc., of the original experience and of the memory and of that event.

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, doesn't *seem* to have the impact at the time. A little while later, the memory of that exchange, event, touch, whatever it is, that sense, impact, comes back and it becomes imaginal. 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. [laughs] 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. I think it was called *Cowboys & 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 on the cowboys' side. 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 [laughs], she crawls into the core of the bad aliens' spaceship with an explosive device, clasps it with crossed arms to her heart centre – a gesture, crosses her arms, clasps this sort of small bomb, obviously a very powerful bomb, to her heart centre, closes her eyes, and blows herself and the bad aliens' 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 it somehow mirroring or mirrored in a way of relating to *my* life.

So 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. This was actually some months before I found out about the metastases. But 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 the openness and the infinitude of the infinite echoing and mirroring) certainly my work, etc. 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 specifics of that, and the nebulousness that, and the open-endedness, and the fuzzy edges, the soft, elastic edges, and the individual meanings within an infinite meaningfulness, etc., all of that. I choose that partly because it seemed an odd place for a potent image to come from, but basically, art, etc., can spawn images in us.

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 completely opportunistic I would be. What I want to try 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, you know, as part of a helpful vessel. 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," etc., or whatever the doubt says. "That's too weird. That's not weird enough," whatever the doubt is. But that attitude of just being willing to kind of go with something, work with it, see what happens. 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 “This is the path. These are the teachings.” There wasn’t that, you know? I had read some Hillman and some Jung, and some other stuff that didn’t really touch me. In a way, I was just exploring a whole territory of possibility and seeing, if you like, what could be made of it, or what felt helpful in there, or what felt important, and what was helpful in ways of working, what was helpful in ways of conceiving. That’s a little bit different from, I suppose, you maybe listening to Catherine and I say, “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, if you like, and 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 actually becomes, can become, potent image. That’s why sometimes when I give the examples, I actually include those moments, “Oh, and the mind was drifting, and then there was a daydream, and I thought, ‘Oh, that’s ...’, so I was ignoring it and kind of putting it to one side. Then I decided to turn towards it, and that very daydream that seemed unimportant became really fertile,” etc. So yeah, I want to encourage that kind of attitude of opportunism, research, just trying, just going for it, you know. That’s 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 there, and tune right and all of that, then something that may have seemed very inconsequential or irrelevant or whatever, or just silly, can become image. And related to this – again, 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. I look back and think, “Well, that really wasn’t imaginal in the sense that we have,” but it doesn’t matter, you know? It’s part of getting the feet wet, working out, getting practice, getting skill, getting facility, etc. And then you can steer that process guided by, again, what feels soulmaking, what feels beautiful, etc., as it goes, rather than being too quick to judge, “Oh, that’s not right. Oh, that can’t be ...”, and then dismissing things, and it’s hard for things to get going.

I’ve put out as well, maybe in the *Path of the Imaginal* talks, maybe in some other talks, as well – I think there was a whole list of possible kind of techniques (I don’t know whether to call them tricks, but let’s call them techniques) to sort of see if one can kick-start the imaginal process, or at least to receive some images, and then they become imaginal.² I’m not going to list them again. But sometimes, just to say – and again, this might be something I’ve said before, but it’s worth saying again – we put too much pressure on the sort of demanding an image. No one’s going to have images all the time, all day long, and anyway, 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, or *samādhi*, or emptiness, etc. 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, the pain or lack or confusion we are feeling. Or, as I said, don’t put too much pressure on now, just do some practice with the energy body, or with the emotions, or *samādhi*, or emptiness, or *mettā*, or whatever it is.

Sometimes – and again, partly it’s 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. [54:30] But if we go back to what we were talking about in the definition of ‘fantasy’ yesterday evening, sometimes we need to stop putting 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 practices, 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 and way of practising mindfulness.

It becomes possible to practise mindfulness every day, formally and informally in life, and sort of put the time into 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 *mettā* practice or breath concentration practices, to quote two 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 *mettā* 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 *mettā*,” or “I *was* feeling it. Now it’s really dry,” or the breath, “But 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 using the breath as an anchor or doing *mettā* 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 skilful teaching. It’s really important. It also, though, has its potential pitfalls – sloppiness, and yes, even kind of incorrectness or unhelpful practice can become an 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 that way of practising or the way of regarding practising is actually the most helpful.

So sometimes what happens, for some people practising, or in even some Saṅghas or whatever, is that practice and the path can become kind of devoid of any sense of progress or goal. And, in a way, then, there’s a kind of merciful release in that, because one does away with any of the pressure or the danger of feeling like a failure or all that. But also, in that way, it might mean that it delivers only a

kind of pitiful fraction of what practice otherwise might. Again, just talking about different practices and the kind of attitudes to getting certain kinds of experience. If we think about emptiness practices, for instance, as I would teach them, they actually *are* supposed to yield certain openings or experiences or shifts of perception. But there's also a way that it can be regarded as simply engaging repeatedly this or that way of looking as a practice, and 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.

For example, like I said, "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 also translate that to, let's say, *anicca* practice or *anattā* practice, again, as I would conceive it, where one is deliberately seeing things as *anicca* (as impermanent), or *anattā* (as not me, not mine, not-self), and let's say the mind wanders as one is trying to do that practice, but then one can decide to see or regard the mind wandering, the actual wandering of the mind, is impermanent, or the staying focused is impermanent. So everything can get subsumed in those practices, *anicca*, *anattā*, and again, it helps just loosen and soften the sort of brittleness and danger that can come with sort of overemphasis on "Am I succeeding? Am I failing? Am I getting the experience I'm supposed to get?" Even when the mind wanders, it's like, 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 soulmaking practice? So this is a little more complex, because an image is a certain experience, or an imaginal image is a certain experience, a sensing with soul is a certain realm of experience that's not, if you like, run-of-the-mill, ordinary experience. So what can we say about this? One thing is, remember, as I stressed yesterday, that there's always the possibility of practising what we might call foundations or fundamentals or whatever – the energy body awareness, the *samādhi*, the emotional awareness and skill, practices like *anattā*, twoness and the balance of attention. All these are part of soulmaking practice. So again, 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. So when an image is not arising, or seems difficult to sustain or whatever it is, one can always just move into these other practices, and one is still taking care of the foundations and the roots of imaginal practice. And, as we've said, you can always revisit a previous image, or a prescribed image, or a kind of conventional image, etc.

Or one can entertain a deliberate idea. So 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*, the entertaining and lightly holding a certain idea about the cosmos, about self, about matter, about the world, about whatever it is, about one's personal history, about *dukkha*, about anything, that entertaining of that idea, deliberately, lightly, skilfully, becomes like a seed or a yeast that opens up the perception to more sensing with soul. So there are all those possibilities, too, when it seems like certain experiences, i.e. imaginal images, are not occurring immediately.

Sometimes maybe an image isn't arising, it seems a bit barren or stuff, but we can try to adopt, just gently, skilfully kind of try to adopt 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. And 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 *dukkha*,

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? And perhaps in relationship to some, maybe vague sense, probably vague sense of divinity, that is not formed as an image? So I have a kind of beginnings of a humility, beginnings of an openness, or attempting to support a kind of gentle openness to all that, to the *dukkha*, to the sense of life and being and soul, and I have some vague sense of divinity. It's not an image. But all that is soulmaking practice, because we're dealing with the elements there that are roots, fundamentals, aspects of images. Even that, even if an image doesn't arise from that, it's a beautiful space to be in. It's a beautiful posture, poise of the soul to be in and to practise. And it's possible that it will be very fertile, that out of that humility and openness in relation to a *dukkha* and in relation to some vague sense of non-imaged divinity, that, for instance, the self, or one's life and one's narrative, becomes image out of that soil, that fertile soil, the material in the alchemical vessel, out of the womb that's being created there.

As I said before, imaginal practice is partly art and partly grace. In other words, there *is* an art to it; that's why we talk about all these elements. That's why I'm partly giving all these talks and saying, "You can do this, or you can do that, or just emphasize this more, or draw that out, or pay attention to this," or whatever it is. There's a lot of art, a lot of 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 soulmaking. But it's art *and* grace. In other words, there's always going to be an aspect of imaginal practice that is beyond our control, that's not in our power, never completely in our mastery, in the range of our mastery. There's some kind of – we're *given* images; we wonder, "How could I ...?" Again, if you've been practising Soulmaking Dharma for a while, you'll recognize, sometimes you'll have an experience or you're with someone who's reporting an experience, and you think: how could, given everything that was going on, this particular *dukkha* and that particular history, and that particular view, and this difficulty, and whatever it was, and then some image arises that one never could have predicted, and yet it somehow carries with it the soul's intelligence of somehow 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 kind of constellation of difficulty or situation or perception just beforehand. It's a gift from the depths of soul. It's a grace. We can't, we couldn't have conjured that, have figured it out: "Oh, yes. I think I should imagine this."

So part art, partly art, and partly grace. And that's really good to remember, I think, with imaginal practice. So yes, we are interested obviously in certain kinds of experiences, sensing with soul and imaginal experiences, but again, I'm really talking about attitude. Attitude is part of the vessel, that the attitude is part of a healthy, nourishing, rich womb. Let's see. So again, if we talk about attitude a little bit, sometimes, as I've mentioned, quite a bit yesterday and just briefly tonight, sometimes it's good not to put too much pressure on the visual sense. And even when a person knows and has understood, "Oh, yeah, images are not necessarily visual, or that's not the most important thing," sometimes there can just be a – I don't know; is it cultural? Why? – a habit or a tendency to just, even subtly, kind of expect or demand some kind of visual experience.

So just in the last week or so, I've found a helpful phrase for myself: let the body lead. Let the body lead. Which, of course, means the energy body and the whole awareness and sensitivity to the whole energy body. And it's as if, again, *that* has a kind of intelligence, or *that* becomes a factor. It's one of

the elements, of course, but as an element, it ignites, and it's part of the alchemy, part of what allows the alchemical process. It's as if then something comes *through* the body, or the *body* senses, and the body kind of leads the way to an imaginal sense, which may then involve something visual, or may not. But instead of, almost unaware or unconsciously, putting just a little bit too much pressure on wanting something visual, some visual experience or transformation of a scene or something like that, letting the body lead, just checking, taking the pressure off any visual expectation or demand of visuals, and noticing the heart and the emotions. Sometimes it's about relaxing with that and finding or tuning a certain poise.

So a lot of imaginal practice and sensing with soul is really about a poise, just being responsive and tuning, but finding the right poise of being, poise of attention, poise of heart, poise of *intention*, attitude. All that is part of the poise that can – it will vary from time to time, what poise is it that allows image to come forth, *if* it's, as I said, part of the grace of the gods at that point. So a little while ago, really not too long ago, it was a spring evening, beautiful light through the young, green leaves, and sort of translucence of the foliage in the trees to that light. And again, I sort of, "Let the body lead." I think, again, I was in a car, and kind of relaxing the body, and being aware of the whole energy body, and then noticing. What came first to the awareness was the sense of being loved. So it wasn't something visual that came first. The poise was played with a little bit in a kind of relaxation, take the pressure off the visual, be with the whole body, let the whole body lead, and notice. And I noticed there was a sense of "I'm loved." So it wasn't visual. That's what came first. And again, 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 any kind of sensing with soul in the more obvious sense, the more common sense.

And being with that very lovely feeling, subtle feeling but lovely feeling of being loved, I wasn't quite sure who's loving me here. And then slowly, gradually – it happened over a minute or two, I think – all the trees, there was a sense, and again, it's quite vague, and I'm pointing out the vagueness so that you will recognize. 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 somehow the trees were *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 with soul. But it was probably allowed by taking the pressure off the really subtle and unconscious demand for a visual transformation, a visual experience.

Again, by the way, this points to: when we talk about an imaginal image, or a sensing with soul, we're talking about a confluence of elements – energy body, poise, attitude, love, being loved, etc. Just lingering on that example, there's again this kind of opportunistic attitude. It's as if, as I said, the antennae are open and working, and without pressure, just ready to receive, ready to tune. They're sensitive, tuned to receive anything that could be or become soulmaking.

This is a different experience that I had, but it's somewhat similar: the being loved came first, and then an emotional awareness came of grief. So what does this imply? It implies that, again, in this confluence of elements that we call an image, or an imaginal image, or an imaginal constellation, in the confluence of elements there, 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 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, this is by the by, but we could ask, 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, like anything else, it doesn’t 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, you know. That’s by the by.

So again, talking about what can help us to receive, to open to images, for them to be born, for the transubstantiation to happen in the alchemical vessel. Sometimes, you know, we might be feeling quite flat, in the sense our perception is quite one-dimensional. We might feel unresourced or unanchored, overwhelmed, etc., and taking that into the meditation, including that into the meditation. I’ve talked about this, I think, in the *Dukkha and Soulmaking* talks.³ There might be a way of gently regarding one’s life and one’s self from the perspective of beyond death, so to speak. *Sub specie aeternitatis*, from the perspective, from the view of eternity, as if you see your whole life, your whole narrative, however long that is, however long is 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 as it’s going on, all the challenge that’s going on, that very move itself can allow and support a sensing with soul of oneself. One senses oneself with soul, one’s narrative with soul, and then also the world, etc. And it may not be that an intrapsychic image arises from that. It may just be 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, 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, etc., really helpful at times. But we’re talking about including, and retaining, and giving import to and significance to, the particularities of *our* soul, *our* lives, *our* journeys, *our* narratives, *our* difficulties, *our dukkha*, etc., rather than dissolving them in some kind of equality of oneness (wonderful as that is, at times – 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 her angle of it, but one of the pieces of which she shared was something about the idea “I am soul.” And 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, practising with that idea. It became quite potent for me. There was this idea which she shared; it was just a part of something she was sharing, an exploration that 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 a sensing with soul. So “I am soul” – what it really was, or part of what it was for me, or 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 sort of 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” was 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, etc., and relativized also the ontological status of the body: “I am soul. I am not just body.” Again, this wasn’t, like, filled out as an idea in all its details and all its sort of philosophy, etc. It was reasonably loose. But with that, 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, etc. 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 soulmaking – 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 a 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, this body, my illness, my life, my self, matter, etc., the interaction of body and soul, all of that was open to sensing with soul. Very, very beautiful and fertile sort of opening that happened.

One of the kind of 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, might have been a little bit different or even quite a lot different from what Catherine meant originally – doesn’t matter. The principle is an idea, as I mentioned earlier, can be taken up and function as a kind of soulmaking seed, a seed for soulmaking, a yeast, something that fertilizes and opens the sensing with soul and the perception of anything, really.

Again, I don’t want to stretch the analogies of alchemy or womb too much, 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 – so there’s a birth, and how do we tend to that infant? I don’t want to stretch the analogy too far. But I want to share something from a yogi who, again, gave me permission to share these. Just to emphasize this point of when an image is partially formed, that our attunement, our sensitivity to what is essential here, in the sense of what feels, what aspect of it feels soulful, feels the most soulmaking – and it might be an idea, or it might be an aspect of the image, or 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 – that the painter, Egon Schiele (a Viennese painter at the turn of the century, some of you will know), and also Bach’s music are often imaginal figures for her, she said. Not so much Bach the person or the composer, but Bach’s music. But 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; I’m not sure. 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 her eros sexually or romantically in her life. So that she was blocking her eros, and that caused a certain aridity in general in her practice.

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, okay? So it’s not the fact of having the 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 soulmaking.” 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 a sort of 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, a sense to trust, conversely. But again, going back to the point about eros – as I’ve stressed; it’s worth stressing again – eros in *our* language is not necessarily sexual. Okay? So there can be eros that has no sexual element in it at all, and sex can certainly be without eros in our sense.

But anyway, eros is not necessarily sexual. So perhaps she also had a kind of limited idea of eros and also of what needed to happen in her life, etc. I was responding to this and suggested that there *was* eros in the being painted. The painter 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 or, 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, etc. Again, who knows what would happen? I didn’t hear back from her 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 scene. But again, it’s this necessity to tune into, in this case, *where* is the eros? Because with the eros will be the soulmaking sense, right? They go together, of course. So where is the soulmaking? Where is the soulfulness? What’s the aspect or strand of this complex image? 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 soulmaking? 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 for her, which was actually a passage or a scene from Bach’s *St Matthew Passion*. Some of you may know. It’s a great piece of music. And the centurion at Christ’s crucifixion, the centurion sort of 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. Just something in there moves me.” Again, it’s inexplicable. The soul is touched inexplicably there. And her question was about eros. So again, there *is* eros there. It’s in the centurion for Christ. 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 *mettā*, yes? And certainly more than some kind of coldly logical conclusion about Jesus’s ontological nature: “Oh. You are divine.”

Carried by the music, in those words, “Truly, thou art the Son of God,” there is more than *mettā* and more than a sort of deduction of some fact, existential fact. 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 was 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. Yeah? And so I'm looking for the eros, and the eros goes with the soulmaking, 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 our imagination of the centurion's experience, our sense of that, our receptivity to that experience. That's where the soulfulness and the soulmaking is.

So sometimes it's just a more subtle receptivity and sensitivity to notice and tune to where the eros and soulmaking is with an image at any time. That's very much part of what allows an image to have its vitality and allows us to nourish it, to feed it. [1:38:50] 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 or whatever. But sometimes you get images that seem to kind of express a similar theme or have a similar kind of object, but they're actually different. And we can see that sometimes images are happening in series like that, there's a series of images, which is important.

I remember – this was about a year ago, I think – I had an image of a dervish, you know, 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. This particular image didn't even have, at the moment of arising and working with it in meditation, didn't even have 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 a certain medication and not sleeping because of a thyroid condition. So the mind was drifting. It [the image] 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, and 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, a 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 effect this or that, to make soul, the organ of sensing with 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 even think, “Well, that was neither here nor there. It's not one to write home about,” or whatever. 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, etc.

And that walking up and down, that sense of the body, which is also sense of self, went into a kind of cosmopoesis in its connection with the surroundings. But very particular, particular to that image, particular to the kind of nakedness or sense of nakedness and openness and freedom that came into the body with that. But 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 start to see, "Oh, there's a process there." Yeah?

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* talks,⁴ and a kind of sensitivity or attunement or wisdom to the pacing that is involved in any kind of imaginal birth and imaginal tending, or tending to the imaginal: I really 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, whether we call it part of the womb or part of the tending or part of the birthing; the analogies break 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 a world of images and sensing with soul.

Sometimes a person – following this theme a little longer – has an image and wants to write a poem about the image. This is something for you to find out and do your own research, etc. 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, I don't tend to write poems about images that come in imaginal practice. It feels like that does something – 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, etc., but it's something to be careful about and to investigate. Or if someone wants to paint an image or whatever, or sculpt it. 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 here's one instance where perhaps our practice forges a different path, goes in a different direction. If I write a poem or paint an image or whatever it is, if I do that, or if I do it *too soon* – maybe that's the operative, important word – if I do it too soon, it may detract, as I said, from the potential development to the fullness of the image and the fully imaginal, and detract from our relationship with it. It *may*; I'm not saying it *will*, but it may. It's something to look out for and actually find out: does it, or does it not?

Of course, if I'm experimenting with that, if I'm doing some research, I have to experiment with a number of images where I *do* that and a number of images where I *don't* do that, and begin to see what happens. Or if I decide to paint or write it, when, and how, and what needs to be involved in that process in order not to lose the soulmaking potential of the image? So there might be an artistic potential, and that's great, but that may or may not overlap with the soulmaking image. It may be a different thing. Because, for me, I think, as a poet or an artist, one has *other* concerns – concerns with form, with rhythm, with balance, with sound, with all that. Or I think one *should* have, as an artist or a

poet – you’re not just describing something; there are actually whole other aspects of the artistic work and product that need really a lot of careful attention and tuning to, and those are not per se imaginal.

Now, it might be that the engagement with an art becomes imaginal. The self, art itself or the self as artist in that process, *that* becomes imaginal, but that’s a different thing than the image being imaginal. So you’ll have to see with this, but for me they’re divergent directions; they’re not the same. I have a soulmaking relationship certainly with writing poetry, and music, and writing, even Dharma stuff or whatever it is I’m writing, but that’s different than the content, the image or whatever, being soulmaking for us, and having its full sort of possibility to work in the soul and to become fully soulmaking, and the soulmaking dynamic in relation to that image to really kick off. The soulmaking dynamic might kick off in relation to art in general, or writing in general, or being an artist, etc., but that’s different than with *that* thing, *that* image.

So Jung, as I said, Jungians tend to emphasize this materialization of an image, but I think for us the materializing may be more in the energy body, and in the emotionally sensitive relationship, and in the refractions into duty and infinite mirroring. All these are a kind of materializing. It’s materializing in the body. It’s materializing in the emotions. It’s doing its work there. It’s transforming things. It’s shaping things. And also, as I said, in the refractions into duty and the infinite echoing/mirroring in our life. All that takes great sensitivity and attentiveness. And if my sensitivity and attentiveness are taken up with artistic intentions – as I said before, about form, or colour, or shading, or balance, or rhythm, or whatever it is – that’s a slightly (at least slightly) different intention than soulmaking in relation to that image.

Similarly about expressing an image, or manifesting an image, or expressing it in movement and dance. But again, I don’t want to set some kind of law. It’s really to explore. But if you’re going to explore this, explore it carefully. Explore it with an open mind, and be thorough in the research. You don’t need to throw everything out. You might decide you can have both, okay? You can have your artistic process, you can have your dance practice, you can have your writing poems or whatever, or it might be a matter of timing or whatever. But I’m cautious here, certainly about laying down any laws. It’s for *you* to find out. But if you’re going to find out, research with integrity, and with discernment, and with precision, and care, and open-mindedness. In relation to movement, at least – maybe not dance – we had those sessions on the *Foundations* retreat and maybe some other retreats (I don’t know if they were recorded on the other retreats) where we explored movement, either in relation to another person or on one’s own, in a group or whatever, and its relationship with soulmaking and with image in different ways.⁵ We explored a little bit of that. I think there’s huge potential there, really exciting possibilities. But it may be that it, again, diverts or hinders, limits the soulmaking potential of any particular image. It *may* be.

Several people have already said to me that dance and movement stimulate images for them, and in fact that dance and movement are the most powerful and fertile grounds for the generation of images. So that may be, and there may be individual differences here. For other people, it just renders the imaginal kind of impossible. There are all kinds of possibilities here just from differences in personal propensity, but also in what can be trained to be possible. But the question I would have is: are all the subtleties of imaginal practice available and accessible while moving or while dancing? Now, they might be. Or they might possibly be, if one practises with it and trains with it. Or it might be just by

virtue of moving and dancing, actually, we're kind of limiting just how delicate and sensitive we can be at that time in relationship to an image, and therefore, again, how fertile, how deep, how rich, how potent the soulmaking can be in relation to that image. But as I said, to be explored, experimented with, researched, for myself, for others, for all of us if we're interested in that (which I certainly am). So I want to be careful in teaching this that the whole logos doesn't just reflect *my* tendencies, or *my* kind of capacities at the expense of different capacities that someone else might have. But I hope that all makes sense.

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, if you like, of the birth, and to have a good womb, and to have the possibility of the birthing of images, and the tending to what is born there? He's not that well-known, actually, but there was a great pagan philosopher and Neoplatonist called Iamblichus, who lived many centuries ago. He talked about, in relation to pagan rituals and the relationship with the gods, etc., and he used a certain word, a Greek word, *epitedeotes*. The word doesn't matter in Greek, but 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, etc.

This *epitedeotes* is this fitness or aptitude. It came to be used by Neoplatonists to explain why there were different kind of experiences in a ritual, for example, different mystical experiences. And an image, which parallels some of the Buddha's images, just as dry wood provides the capacity, the fitness or aptitude, the *epitedeotes* for fire to manifest, to be actual, so, similarly, the purity of a soul provides the capacity for a god to become manifest. This is actually from a book by Gregory Shaw, called *Theurgy and the Soul*, that's a lot about Iamblichus's teachings.⁶ So Plotinus as well, the, if you like, founder of Neoplatonism, also accounted for different experiences of souls in the presence of the holy ideas as being due to the differences in the fitness of the recipient, the quality of the vessel at that time. We don't have to make like this person or that person is always more fit, or that's who they are; it's *at the time*, the vessel is like *this*. At another time, the vessel is like *that*. Yeah? So Plotinus actually compared it to the reception of light in clear or muddy water – so how that water kind of holds or reflects or carries the light, the sunlight that falls on it, differs a lot if it's muddy or clear, etc.

Iamblichus is interesting – his teaching, he puts it in the passive, like “it's the gods doing things.” So 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 “we can do *this*” or “it's in our control what happens, what experiences happen, or what mystical openings happen,” etc. He talks very much in the passive, and the fitness, the *epitedeotes*, the aptitude of a passive element to receive the influence of an active one – in this case, a god.

What else to say about this? So ‘purifications’ – it's partly to do with ‘purity’ for him. This word, which is a loaded word, I know, but I'm going to try and give it a certain slant. They're necessary for every soul, and so Iamblichus says that “the time one spends in prayer nourishes the intuitive mind and generally enlarges the soul's receptacle for the gods.”⁷ The soul's readiness for divine transformation – he's talking about this aptitude, this fitness; he describes conditions of the soul that are “fit to receive the god,” describes a kind of cleansing of the soul that makes it fit. So the soul itself was a kind of

receptacle of the god. The soul itself is the alchemical vessel, if you like, in this – well, we make too much of a stretch of an analogy there.

In *our* paradigm, in *our* language, then, if you like, all of the elements of the imaginal, all those twenty-eight nodes, and maybe more, as we talked about (maybe vulnerability is one), certainly humility, certainly the imaginal Middle Way, the theatre-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 *epitedeotes*, the caring for the *epitedeotes*, 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 all the rest of it. And also, as we said before, the relationship with emotions – this is all part of the fitness of the vehicle, the aptitude, let's say the caring for the vessel at the time. Yes? Okay. So we're going to go into quite a bit more detail with some of this, but I just wanted to give some hopefully helpful pointers today.

¹ Luke 1:38.

² Rob Burbea, "Opening, Tuning, and Relating to the Imaginal: Instructions (1)" (10 Aug. 2015), <https://dharmaseed.org/teacher/210/talk/31531/>, accessed 18 March 2021.

³ Rob Burbea, "Dukkha and Soulmaking Part 6" (2 Jan. 2018), <https://dharmaseed.org/teacher/210/talk/50490/>, accessed 18 March 2021.

⁴ Rob Burbea, "What is an 'Image'? (Part 1)" (9 Aug. 2015), <https://dharmaseed.org/teacher/210/talk/31538/>, and "Opening, Tuning, and Relating to the Imaginal: Instructions (3)" (11 Aug. 2015), <https://dharmaseed.org/teacher/210/talk/31532/>, accessed 18 March 2021.

⁵ Rob Burbea, "Voice, Movement, and the Possibilities of Soul" [Parts 1 and 2] (24–26 June 2018), <https://dharmaseed.org/teacher/210/?search=voice+movement+possibilities+of+soul>, accessed 18 March 2021.

⁶ Gregory Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul: The Neoplatonism of Iamblichus* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995).

⁷ Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries*. See also Thomas Taylor's translation (1821): "Lastly, the continual exercise of prayer nourishes the vigour of our intellect, and renders the receptacles of the soul far more capacious for the communications of the Gods," https://web.archive.org/web/20141121164922/http://ars-theurgica.org/taylor_on_the_mysteries.html, accessed 18 March 2021.