

Some Thoughts on The Imaginal

These thoughts are the result of some searching around to try and understand what is written about the imaginal and then to begin to work out how the imaginal might be related to Samatha. I hope they are of use.

What is the imaginal? Henri Corbin is credited with coining the word and, in part, the imaginal was invoked to make clear what it was not. It is not imaging or imagination with all the contradictions it brings with it of the mind playing tricks and constructing things whose foundations turn out to be illusory. The imaginal, in contrast, is a different order of reality – the mundus imaginalis – surrounding the material reality of the everyday we believe we inhabit.¹ It is an intermediary world between the sensible world or material reality and a world of intelligences. For Corbin each world is accessible through a different mode of perception: the sensible world through the senses; the imaginal world through active imagination; and the world of intelligences through the intellect. This threefold approach mirrors a longstanding division of body (soma), soul (psyche) and spirit (pneuma).

These ideas stem from Islamic thought and experience particularly associated with Al-Arabi (whom Bernard discussed in a talk last month in Manchester²) and Sahrawadi whom for Corbin holds an especial attraction. Corbin's approach is of great interest as he sets out the imaginal as a central and objective aspect of our human condition. And he raises interesting questions and modes of inquiry which he probably would have argued are applicable to other traditions. Corbin is in no doubt that the imaginal is perfectly real though hidden from the ways we perceive reality through the senses. In fact, he goes further and says that '... its reality is more irrefutable and more coherent than the empirical world.'³ We are left with further questions or lines of inquiry. If what Corbin states is valid, how do you experience the imaginal? Do you reach out to it?; is it always present?; are there methods to access it and return to the everyday? How might the imaginal manifest for individuals and in different cultures? These are matters for exploration, I suspect, rather than writing.

We do have some guides and their usefulness can be made clearer by testing through active exploration of their approaches. One rich seam is different aspects of Buddhist traditions. In Samatha, suttas have often been an entry point such as the universal monarch sutta which can be a basis for visualisation or the chanting of the Mahā Samaya sutta which invokes different realms of beings.⁴ No doubt there is many other examples either being explored or awaiting future investigation. Yet, it is work with the imaginal from other traditions – closer in space and to western cultural histories that are particularly intriguing given the greater familiarity of these themes to a contemporary audience. One example is the work of George Russell (often known as AE), who, with an early aptitude for this work, and influenced by theosophy, wrote extensively about the imaginal which he called the 'many coloured world' and evoked Celtic mythologies for an Irish audience some hundred years ago.⁵ Here, we find one person's careful manual of how he developed these experiences which invite further exploration of the approaches he adopted. Many other ways, not surprisingly, are possible and might be explored. What becomes most appealing about these prior

explorations is that they have developed in circumstances closer to those we find ourselves today and further work can be continued by individuals or in groups.

Let's now turn to consider the imaginal and its relation to Samatha. In one way we might claim it is very closely related as some of the work mentioned earlier suggests, and, in another way, it has some major differences. Let me explain. Samatha could be said to be concerned with processes of purification; becoming more skilled in recognising and letting of bodily, speech and mental activities which limit the mind in a variety of ways. More positively, Samatha identifies the good and the skilful – 'a fine extract to be drunk' as one text puts it.⁶ We can have some success for periods of time – Samatha – or insight might arise which gives the possibility of a fuller integration. The imaginal is a strong candidate as Samatha; a common feature is the experience that the mind drops, at least, some of its unhelpful conditioning and experiences when accessing an imaginal world. We could describe this akin to access concentration when hindrances subside and the faculties are present if unbalanced.⁷ It might be expressed as different mental states; it might be associated with *iddhi*; it could be linked with other beings or it could be elements of all of these and others besides. Two benefits come to mind. Being more familiar with these aspects of perception can enable confidence and wonder to arise – useful antidotes to a sense of dryness and of doubt which may set in after someone has practiced for a while and the practice starts to appear to be habitual. Experiencing the imaginal also gains access to a world that is potent in which unresolved aspects buried in the mind may find form and demand a response. Again, such phenomena need, at some point, to be assimilated and pacified and introducing and developing access to the imaginal may be a question of the right time, person, and place and perhaps should not be taken lightly.

These points are usually specific to individuals and of great importance. There is a wider point too. The imaginal is an intermediary realm in which teachings and experiences can become refashioned in ways accessible to our perception. In other words it is a means by which teachings can be brought to life and perhaps appear more relevant and accessible to our contemporary (and sensible) world. Exploring the imaginal in this respect is likely to be useful and lead to creative forms of teaching.

What emerges so far is that the imaginal might be useful in work for oneself and in work for others; what about work for the work's sake? We can view the imaginal as one aspect of mind capable of being experienced and interpreted in multiple ways depending, to some extent, on our desires and interests shaped by our culture and upbringing. For example, those with a Christian upbringing may have angelic experiences; for Irish Celts we may speculate the imaginal was the entrance to Tír nÓg, the land of perpetual youth. The nature of the imaginal is powerful though shaped by many things. In that sense it is not ultimate safety. Paths from the imaginal in that direction seem to have similarities in different traditions though expressed in specific languages. For certain traditions of Islam, as Corbin shows, the imaginal appears as an intermediary realm and moving to the ultimate requires knowing and transcending that world. John of Ruysbroeck, a medieval Christian mystic, cautioned to look further than visions and towards other experience in prayer. In Tibetan traditions, visualising and gaining experiences of a cosmology of deities is usually a prelude to learning how to dissolve these images at will. In short, the imaginal is an important aspect of mind requiring investigation and experience on a path leading further. It seems that most traditions do not see this

path as simply pointing to something more numinous and otherworldly; they also recognise that a mark of useful experience of these realms will manifest in how we act in the day to day.

C W, 21st November 2014.

¹ Henri Corbin has written extensively on the imaginal particularly in relation to Islamic thought and to work of Swedenborg. Some helpful starting points are an official website (mainly in French) <http://www.amiscorbin.com/> and a useful site on the legacy of Henri Corbin which has several of his works on line <http://henrycorbinproject.blogspot.co.uk/>

² Talk by Bernard Bolton 'Samatha by any other Name: a speculative inquiry into the Creative Imagination', Manchester Centre for Buddhist Meditation, 6th October 2014.

³ Corbin, H. (1972). [Mundus Imaginalis, the Imaginary and the Imaginal](#). *Spring*, 1972 pp. 1–19. New York: Analytical Psychology Club of New York, Inc. available at <http://hermetic.com/moorish/mundus-imaginalis.html>

⁴ Mahāsudassana Sutta, Dīgha Nikāya D ii169; Mahāsamaya Sutta, Dīgha Nikāya, D ii 253; see also Sarah Shaw, *The Spirit of Buddhist Meditation*, Yale University Press, London, 2014, pages 130-139.

⁵ George Russell (AE), *The Candle of Vision: Inner Worlds of the Imagination*. Prism Press, Bridport, 1990 (1918).

⁶ Paṭisambhidāmagga (The Path of Discrimination, translated Nāṇamoli, Pali Text Society, Oxford, 1991 pp. 282-285).

⁷ Sāmaññaphala Sutta, Dīgha Nikāya D I 70-73 (see also *The Spirit of Buddhist Meditation* pp.64-67).