

Imaginal Practices in Dialogue: Tibetan Self-Generation and Active Imagination

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Abstract: Jungian psychology considers image to be the basis of psyche, and its principal technique is active imagination. While the importance of image is appreciated in Jungian circles, it is not shared outside the field, where the imagination is generally seen as “not real.” The unreality of the imagination contradicts the assertion of French philosopher Corbin who insisted that the imaginal realm is not only real but also a crucial bridge between the spirit and material realms, whose split has been diagnosed as the root cause of many modern problems. The reality of the imaginal provides the ontological foundation to place Jung’s active imagination in dialogue with the imaginal practice of self-generation from the Tibetan school of Tantric Buddhism, highlighting key tensions between the approaches. By applying the principle of Jung’s transcendent function, it seeks a third path from that tension, providing modern psychological and spiritual adepts with insight to cultivate the power of the imaginal realm in their own lives.

Keywords: image, imagination, imaginal realm, East-West, Buddhism, Tantra, Corbin, self-generation, non-duality

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The material crises of the modern world, whether viewed from an ecological, economic, or political lens, are being traced back to mistaken foundational worldviews in the modern psyche. They become matters of spirit and soul, the very ground of depth psychology. The ultimate root cause of these present-day ills is increasingly being diagnosed as the spirit-matter split, often simplistically attributed to René Descartes. The split has created the experience of a disenchanted world, where our minds “in here” are separate from the world around us. Philosopher Taylor (2007) wrote that the experience of disenchantment creates the phenomenon of “disengaged reason,” which if left to its devices will “run on perhaps to destruction, human and ecological, if it recognizes no limits” (p. 9). However, the splitting that is evident in the Age of Reason developed over a much longer period prior to Descartes. Anthropologists have found that some premodern people had concepts of land ownership (only possible if we see ourselves as *somewhat* separate from land), yet a notion of care or sacredness was always included. It was only the Roman system (the basis for modern notions of property), that “the responsibility to care and share [for property] is reduced to a minimum, or even eliminated entirely” (Graeber & Wengrow, 2021, p. 161).

From there, land becomes a source for extraction (ecological destruction) and grounds for dispute (war).

The impersonal treatment of “property” is but one example of how the spirit-matter split underlies much of our modern predicament. A diagnosis is far from a prescription, however. The split goes so deeply into the prevalent worldview that even adopting a radical “pre-split” belief like animism is incredibly difficult to integrate into modern life. Techniques like somatic practices, non-dual awareness, hatha yoga and many others can help, yet at the collective level it is unclear if the split is healing or widening. Between airy spirit and earthy matter, a third realm of existence, the imaginal realm, has been neglected. Existing somewhere *between* spirit and matter, the imaginal realm bridges the divide.

In the field of depth psychology, imagination is often hallowed. Jung (1939/1969) identified image as the essence of psyche, writing that “every psychic process is an image and an ‘imagining’” (p. 544; *CW* 11, para. 889), and named his primary psychoanalytic technique active imagination. Meanwhile, his influential student Hillman (1960/1992) elevated imagination even further, prioritizing the development of an “imaginal ego [that] is more discontinuous, now this and now that . . . moving on a uroboric course” (p. 184), a foil to our dominant, linear, and willful conscious ego.

The imagination is similarly elevated in esoteric mystical branches of religious traditions around the world, particularly in the East. A prime example is the Tantric (*Vajrayāna*) school of Tibetan Buddhism whose “generation stage” practices train the yogi to imaginably create an entire universe laden with symbolic elements. In explaining these methods to Westerners, Tibetan teachers of the Tantric lineage stated simply that “Tantric realizations depend upon faith and imagination” (Gyatso, 1997, p. 17).

What insights could these two approaches to the imagination offer each other if placed in dialogue? The Buddhist approach brings centuries of refinement through lineages of spiritual adepts, while depth psychology provides the means to address our “new psychological dispensation, [our] new manner of understanding the relationship between the divine and the human” (Corbett, 1996/2002, p. 1). Yet East-West syncretism has been underway for over a century and comes with many perils. As Tibet gained mythic status in the West, a colonial mindset was often applied to newly translated Eastern teachings, resulting in a “rush . . . to plunder it for therapeutic techniques, or to correlate it with contemporary science” (Bishop, 1993, p. 40). The overzealous correlation includes the science of depth psychology, whose archetypal theories can be used to reduce ancient and esoteric practices to “nothing but” a series of symbols, transplanted without context into an entirely different epistemological frame than that in which they were born.

These dangers must be taken seriously but the dire need for such cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary dialogue has never been clearer. The dominant rational mindset that has driven technological progress since the Scientific Revolution is beginning to see the limits of its own rationality, but it is too late for those who are “spiritual but not religious” to turn back to the religions of the past. However the distinction between spiritual and religious is often overstated. The distinction only holds if religion is reduced to its most dogmatic and fundamentalist manifestations, capable of becoming the excuse to cause great harm (as it undeniably has at times in history). Yet, supposedly spiritual (but not religious) communities can also fall prey to dogmatic groupthink, which creates division, such as the association between New Age groups and QAnon conspiracy theories (Meltzer, 2021). It is important to recall that the word “religion” derives from the Latin *religāre*, which is

interpreted as “to bind again” (Oxford UP, n.d.). Rather than denouncing religion, the reclamation of the imaginal must embrace its essential role in binding spirit and matter back together again.

As if anticipating a re-binding, the East-West dichotomy is breaking down, as decades of globalization have created a generation of meditating Westerners. Meanwhile, Easterners are increasingly adopting Western lifestyles and worldviews. There is cultural awareness now that creates the potential for an honest dialectical exchange without colonial dynamics, and a willingness to embrace both the sameness as well as the differences across cultures. This essay argues that elevating the imaginal realm is key to healing the spirit-matter split, and that a careful syncretism of imaginal practices from depth psychology and the Tibetan Tantric school of Buddhism can provide insight for spiritual seekers to tap into the transformative power of the imaginal.

The Imaginal: Bridging the Mind-Matter Split

The idea that the imaginal realm is an indispensable third realm, bridging those of spirit and matter, reaches far beyond depth psychology and Tibetan Buddhism. As French philosopher Corbin (1972) posited, there exists “a schema on which all our mystical theosophers agree,” that includes “three categories of universe”: “our physical sensory world” which corresponds to matter, “the suprasensory world of the Soul” accessed through imagination, and the spiritual “universe of pure archangelic Intelligences.” Corbin coined the term *mundus imaginalis* to denote the universe of imagination. Despite similarity across mystical traditions, in current times, the imagination has largely been relegated to a secondary, fanciful, and indulgent function. The relegation coincides with the rise of the rational mindset of the Scientific Revolution which is focused on understanding the material realm to greater degrees, at the expense of other ways of knowing. Over 80 years ago, Jung (2021) already understood that “the active exercise of the imaginative capacity is a matter that is not exactly popular” and that “by fantasy [imagination] we mean something usually quite useless” (pp. 177–178).

The perceived uselessness and lack of popularity of the imagination is due to the modern ontological belief that the imaginal is, by definition, *not real*. The bias is contained in the very basis of the word “real,” whose origins in the late Middle Ages tie directly to that which is “material, objective, [and] that actually exists” (Oxford UP, n.d.). However, the reduction of imagination began even earlier and can be tied to the elevation of sensation (i.e., perception of the material world, as is prized in science). Aristotle, true to his empiricism, valued the imagination but reduced its function to the translation of what we take in through our senses into an inner representation, ultimately in service to our faculty of reasoning (Kearney, 1988/2003, pp. 107–108). Though significant movements like Romanticism tried to reclaim the transcendent side of imagination, ultimately it was overtaken in popular conception by the dominant forces of reductionist science (Erickson, 2019, p. 78). At that point, it was necessary to “create a firm partition between ‘reality’ and ‘unreality,’” which required “a new concept of the *imaginary*” (Erickson, 2019, p. 79). From then until today the imagination became not just less real but the precise opposite of reality.

In contrast, Corbin (1972) insisted that the *mundus imaginalis* “is a perfectly real world, more evident even and more coherent, in its own reality, than the real empirical world perceived by the senses.” The reversal may seem preposterous and unjustifiable until

we recall Jung's (1952/1969) lament that most people do not comprehend that he "regards the psyche as *real*" (p. 464; *CW* 11, para. 751). If we grasp that psyche's primary contents are images and they form the primary basis of reality for the perceiver, Corbin's statement suddenly makes sense. Psychic reality is proven whenever we observe any behavior that seems nonsensical to us; the psychic images that we each hold differ, and as a result our personal realities do as well. The material facts are secondary.

Understanding of psychic reality builds on the discipline of phenomenology, which centers on the study of reality as subjectively experienced. However, to Corbin and Jung (later in his career through study of alchemy and synchronicity), imagination and psyche are not "trapped" inside of us but permeate everything. Therefore, we must be careful to swing too far in the other direction and deny material reality (i.e., spiritual bypass). For the most part, we each are having our own psychic (imaginal) experience, but the shared material experience is an essential input. Acknowledging the imaginal allows us to "see through" (Hillman, 1975, p. 123) what is happening materially and to act in *more* ethical ways, since the imaginal reduces the feeling of division between self and other.

What exactly is the imaginal realm? Corbin (1972) defined it broadly as "a world whose ontological level is above the world of the senses and below the pure intelligible world . . . more immaterial than the former and less immaterial than the latter." Others have attempted to be more specific in its definition. Jung (2021) defined imagination as the moment when an "internal other replies" (p. 8). "Internal other" could mean the unconscious in general or his archetype of the Self (i.e., one's God-image) specifically, but regardless, it necessitates a loosening of egoic control to allow images from beyond conscious control to arise. Hillman (1975) further emphasized the lack of control, arguing that the litmus test for the imaginal is that our "habitual ego senses itself at a loss" (p. 41).

Parallels of the third realm between spirit and matter are found in many theoretical and metaphysical models. Yogic, Taoist, and other Eastern schools posit a subtle body as an intermediary between our physical bodies and spirits. Similarly, the Tibetan Tantric schools assert the existence of the imaginal *sambhogakāya* realm between the material realm of *nirmāṇakāya* and the spiritual realm of *dharmakāya*. When Jung (2021) learned of the three Tibetan realms, he proposed that they "could also describe the three as Self, anima and body" (p. 52). Like Corbin, Jung equated the imaginal with soul (anima), and therefore the pursuit of soul-making is dependent on the imaginal realm. Put more succinctly, Lionel Corbett (2018) wrote that for depth psychologists "the imaginal realm acts as a bridge between consciousness and the unconscious" (p. 175).

Corbin (1972) is unequivocal about not just the reality of the third universe but also its importance, stating that it "appears metaphysically *necessary* [emphasis added]." To understand its necessity, metaphors in addition to that of a bridge can help. One image is that of a messenger, like Hermes travelling between Olympus and Hades, helping to ease communication between our material existence and the hidden realm of spirit. As Glen Slater (2018) described, "the hidden character of the divine is one that must be imagined into, for this hiddenness is not complete or absolute" (p. 190). Roberts Avens (1984/2003) gave the imaginal realm an intercessory role "to mediate between the physical and the spiritual," with the powerful potential "to effect a complete and instantaneous realization of the imagined contents" (pp. 131–132). With this intercession, the imagination *becomes* "real," allowing us to incarnate the divine on the material plane.

The key to the imaginal realm's role in healing duality is its ambiguous and paradoxical nature. It is both semi-subjective (dependent on us) and semi-objective (independent of us). It contains form (images) yet is also ephemeral. Corbin (1969/1998) defined it as containing "both immaterial matter and the incorporeal corporealized" (p. 78). By forcing to us hold paradox and a "both/and" mentality, the imaginal brings dualistic positions together without negating their differences. A second important factor in the imaginal realm's bridging is its conveyance of meaning through symbolic form. In one translation of the Islamic term for imaginal, Corbin (1969/1998) called it "the world of archetypal Images . . . correspondences and symbols" (p. 76). To work with the imaginal means to "deliteralize" (Hillman, 1975, p. 136), which again softens the boundaries between seemingly dualistic concepts.

The East: Indispensable Religious Compensation

With so much emphasis on the imaginal from Western thinkers like Corbin, Jung, and Hillman, what need is there to look to the philosophies of the East? While the West has struggled to place importance on the imaginal, Eastern spiritual traditions have a long history of not only elevating the imaginal but recognizing it as an essential technique for the development of consciousness. Jung (2021) recognized that for Easterners "the training of fantasy, the transformation, the mere act of phantasizing is an active exercise, an absolutely meaningful question in philosophical and religious systems" (p. 178). The systematic training of the imagination is largely missing in Western systems, so it is natural to learn from the East as we seek to develop our modern, mystical imagination.

The turn toward the East was all too familiar for Jung himself, for whom this psychic "other" was not so much an intellectual curiosity but rather "marked a fundamental turning point in the development of his ideas" (Bishop, 1993, p. 42), particularly between 1925–1940 when he was 50–65 years of age. Despite his deep respect for the East, Jung consistently cautioned against the adoption of its practices by Westerners, warning that they would be ineffectual at best, or harmful at worst. Jung's (2021) reticence came from what for him was the basic fact that "the Eastern attitude of mind simply diverges from the Western one," (p. 254) a divergence that he struggled to summarize but traced back to the religious and cultural evolution of East vs. West across thousands of years. Despite this statement in 1939, Jung's thought in this area (as with many aspects of his psychology) continually evolved until his death in 1961. Clarke (1994) in his book *Jung and Eastern Thought*, which summarizes Jung's evolution, concluded:

The warnings he frequently expressed concerning the adoption in the West of Eastern—especially yogic—practices are far more muted in the case of Buddhism, and late in life he felt confident enough to recommend its teachings as 'ways and means of disciplining the inner psychic life' (CW18.1577) *without his usual reservations* [emphasis added]. (p. 119)

With this permission, we are given responsibility to hold the tension between East and West. On one side, we must recognize that the historical differences between East and West are precisely the source of its potential in compensating the one-sided nature of modern (Western) consciousness and that the East's compensation cuts right to its ontological foundation. As Jung (2021) stated, for the West "the concept of the real is based on something actually extended through space in three dimensions, whereas the East has no

such prerequisites” (p. 179). On the other side, we must also acknowledge that the immense value of West’s depth psychology can bring a critical scientific and non-dogmatic lens to bridge esoteric concepts and images to modern consciousness that is no longer content to accept spiritual guidance based on faith or religious authority alone. By addressing the new psychological dispensation of our time, depth psychology “offers the possibility of a unified understanding of those fundamental psychological needs which have hitherto been provided by established religions in the guise of dogma” (Corbett, 1996/2002, p. 107), provided it is not applied in a reductionist mindset that attempts to boil down the mysteries of mystic traditions to a predetermined formula.

Bearing the responsibility in holding the tension between East and West includes carefully understanding how Eastern practices are borrowed or adapted for modern use. There must be a deep inquiry into that happens when the philosophies and practices are “selectively removed from [their] original cultural setting and then relocated . . . [into] another, entirely different context” (Bishop, 1993, p. 15). Conversely, there must also be an honest reckoning of the fantasies that Western culture has projected onto the East generally and Tibet specifically, particularly after the Chinese invasion, which has further elevated the mythic status of figures such as the 14th Dalai Lama. As Shakya (1991) summarized, “The West has always reduced Tibet to its image of Tibet and imposed its yearning for spirituality and solace from the material world onto Tibet” (p. 23). This was true in my experience in 15 years of study and practice in a modern Tibetan Buddhist tradition, founded in the West by an exiled Tibetan lama. The texts were written directly in English in close correspondence with senior students, so misunderstanding could not be blamed on translators. Yet, even with deep faith it was still difficult for me to connect fully with the transplanted symbols and practices, and the devotion to our Tibetan guru made it impossible to question or modify the practices being prescribed.

Perhaps the century of East-West spiritual tensions is ready to yield the “third” of a more integrated spirituality. The dichotomy of East and West is largely breaking down and movements such as the New Age, yoga studios, Traditional Chinese Medicine, Western Buddhism, and secular mindfulness have implanted Eastern spiritual concepts (e.g., meditation, *mantra*, *chakras*, *prāṇa /qi*) deeply in the collective psyche. While such attempts have often been clumsily and incompletely applied, they have also provided a foundation that negates the fundamental “divergence” that Jung observed 80 years ago between the Western and Eastern psyches. Combined with increasing awareness of colonial dynamics and psychological language, the stage seems set for an evolved syncretism of traditionally Eastern and Western thought. The vivification of the imagination in the modern psyche is a crucial application of an effective syncretic approach.

Imaginal Practices: East and West

Before attempting such a syncretism of imaginal practices, it is important to ground the discussion in the existing psychospiritual approaches used in both Western and Eastern traditions. While the East-West frame could include a vast collection of approaches, this section will briefly describe two approaches that elevate the imagination to a place of undisputed primacy: Western approaches to imagination through Jungian/archetypal psychology, and Eastern approaches through Tibetan Tantric Buddhism.

Western Imagination: Active Imagination

Jung's most evident contribution to the development of the imaginal is his technique of *active imagination*, which is a critical part of his psychoanalytic process. There are many definitions of active imagination throughout Jungian literature, but for our purposes it is instructive to examine how Jung described it while comparing his approach directly to the Tibetan *Vajrayāna* practices. During the first lecture he delivered at ETH Zurich in the Winter of 1938–39, Jung (2021) defined active imagination as “a making conscious of fantasy perceptions that are manifesting at the threshold of consciousness” (p. 6). The threshold consciousness mirrors the bridging function of the imaginal realm between the conscious/material and unconscious/spiritual realms.

The nature of these “fantasy perceptions” is clarified by Jung's (2021) description of the psychic mechanism at work, whereby there is “an impregnation of the background, which becomes animated, fructified by our attention” (p. 7). The impregnation, resulting in animation of the psychic background reflects the Jungian understanding of the autonomous nature of the unconscious, and the crucial role of imagination in personifying and symbolizing its contents. Hillman (1975) emphasized that animation of psychic images occurs free of egoic control, berating any technique that attempts to control the imagination as an “abuse of the soul's first freedom—the freedom to imagine” (p. 39).

In calling out the crucial role of *attention* in ensuring that the active imagination bears fruit, Jung points directly at the relationship between meditation and active imagination. Ironically, Jung (2021) argued that Easterners are better prepared to practice his technique than Westerners: “Any concentration of attention in this technique is very difficult . . . [and] can be achieved only through practice Occidental man is not educated to use this technique The East is way ahead of us in this respect” (p. 7). With the explosion of popularity of meditation practice in recent years, the difficulty and lack of education seems overstated, resulting in what I argue is a modern consciousness *more* ready to adopt active imagination (and similar practices) than Jung's audience in 1938.

Eastern Imagination: Tibetan Tantric Self-Generation Practice

The peak of Eastern approaches to the imaginal is found in the self-generation practices of Tibetan Tantric school of Buddhism (also referred to as generation stage or creation stage practice). Tibetan Buddhism was only found in Tibet itself and perceived through Western translations such as those by Woodroffe, which Jung (2021) relied on for his psychological commentary (p. xlv). However, since the Chinese invasion and subsequent exile of the Dalai Lama in 1959, “Tibetan spiritual ideas are now enclosed within a religious and social structure consisting of exiled Tibetan monks, newly ordained Western monks and nuns, and an assorted array of non-monastic lay practitioners” (Bishop, 1993, p. 15). Tibetan spiritual diaspora and dissemination have created new opportunities for understanding and experiencing the depths of these lineages that were unavailable during Jung's lifetime. Kelsang Gyatso, a Tibetan lama in the Gelug school and peer of the Dalai Lama, is one such “exiled Tibetan monk” who began teaching in 1979 in England. As the structures around him grew into an international organization in subsequent decades, I became one such “non-monastic lay practitioner” who rigorously studied the extensive lineage teachings that Gyatso authored directly in English, maintaining the unbroken lineage that is deemed essential.

Gyatso (1994) described generation stage as a “creative yoga,” so called “because its object is created, or generated, by correct imagination” (p. 75). The imaginably generated “object” is no less than an entire mandala (i.e., universe) within which the Tantric meditator arises as an enlightened deity. The use of the word “correct” reinforces the ontological view that the imaginal universe is in some ways more “real” than the material realm, given that our senses and conscious worldviews can easily deceive us. For example, to our ordinary consciousness we may relate to ourselves as solely corporeal and independent beings, whereas in our imagination we may conceive of ourselves as divine and interdependent, a view more in accordance with the mystical traditions of the world.

When it is said that the practices require “faith,” they are not asking for a blind faith but rather a conviction in the power of the imagination. According to Jung (2021), the conviction results in the meditator having “created something with [their] fantasy that adheres to [them],” which results in the fact that their “conscious psychology has changed,” having “made another being” (p. 181). “Adherence” refers to a “sticky” quality to strong imagination, which cannot help transforming our consciousness interacting with the material plane (even after we think that we have stopped imagining), demonstrating the bridging quality of the imaginal. Gyatso (1997) stated that “generation stage meditation can be likened to an artist drawing a rough outline of a picture” (p. 78), and he asserted that without an imaginal outline it is impossible to realize psychospiritual development (i.e., the picture itself).

To help the practitioner develop an imaginal outline, Buddhist lineages provide Tantric *sādhana*s, which translates to “method for attainment” and is a ritual method for accomplishing the self-generation (Gyatso, 1997, p. 101). A *sādhana* includes detailed descriptions of all the imagined beings and objects in the mandala. As Clarke (1994) explained, “the primary function of these images is to act as a kind of cosmological map, to provide a symbolic guide to the structure of the world . . . in which each devotee will have to undertake his or her life’s journey” (p. 135). With an imaginal map, the meditator engages with the terrain of worldly life with transformed consciousness.

Eastern and Western Imagination in Syncretic Dialogue

Having laid out these two contrasting approaches to the imaginal, we can now turn our attention to what is possible if we bring them into a generative syncretic dialogue. Generativity must begin with aspects where the approaches are deeply compatible and can join forces to effectively address essential needs in the current collective psyche. There is no shortage of compatibility between Jungian/archetypal psychology and Tantric self-generation, including 1) their elevation of the imaginal; 2) the shift away from egoic identification and towards identification with the one’s divine nature; 3) the inclusion of evil and the instinctual in psychic wholeness; and 4) the re-ensoulment of the world around us (i.e., *anima mundi*). These parallels deserve exploration with greater depth in further works.

However, such a dialogue also means holding the tension between the approaches, not just focusing on the similarities but also *magnifying* the points of difference. Rather than indicating incompatibility, with trust in the wisdom of both lineages, these differences compensate for each other, pointing out potential historical or cultural limitations in each and allowing the seeker to explore the nuanced “middle way” that is often required for psychospiritual development. The remainder of this essay will focus on the two largest

points of contrast to illustrate how tension is essential to a fruitful syncretic dialogue: 1) The use of spontaneous vs. prescribed images; and 2) the foundational reality of non-duality.

Spontaneous vs. Prescribed Images

A distinct contrast that is evident from the earlier descriptions of each approach is the emphasis on the spontaneous production of images in active imagination contrasted with the prescribed images in Tantric sādhanās. Jung (2021) criticized the prescribed aspect of Tantric texts, pointing out how sādhanā instructions appear to cause any image that “does not agree with the doctrine [to be] rejected as invalid,” resulting in an approach that, like Catholicism, is “strictly orthodox with no room at all for individual experience” (pp. 40–41). Hillman (1975) went even further, deeming any approach that tried to corral the imagination, including meditative yogas specifically, as *fully incompatible* with soul:

Fantasy does not need to achieve a goal. It steps around the instructions of spiritual disciplines which require intense focus, choices toward prescribed goals, moral commitments, and strengthening exercises. For the soul this kind of approach can be called a spiritual fallacy, using religious or meditative disciplines as models for working with images. Fantasy work is closer to the arts, to writing and painting and making music, than it is to contemplation and yoga. (p. 40)

These are important objections to traditional yogic practices. Sociologically, structures designed for the masses such as religious traditions must necessarily bias themselves towards shared experience at the expense of the individual. With the decline of religions and the emphasis on the individual in modern times (as symbolized by democratizing technologies like the Internet), it is no surprise that psychology has veered towards the one-on-one therapeutic encounter as its main vehicle. Yet the association between religion and collectivity on the one hand and psychology and the individual on the other must not be overstated. Religions, particularly in their more esoteric branches, can also deeply value the individual, as exemplified by the concept of *gnosis*. And depth psychology, particularly with its evolution in approaches like Hillman’s archetypal psychology sees soul work as necessarily dependent on that which appears “outside” of us. In his essay on the *anima mundi*, Hillman (1992/2015) wrote seeing the ensouled world “stirs our hearts to respond,” such that we are “concerned about the world; [feel] love for it arising, [making] material things again lovable” (p. 88).

Nevertheless, both Jung and Hillman strongly believed that *only the soul can direct its own healing*. Rather than using mandalas as prescribed tools, Jung (1955/1968) believed that they must arise spontaneously, as “an *attempt at selfhealing* on the part of Nature, which does not spring from conscious reflection but from an instinctive impulse” (p. 388; *CW* 9 pt. 1 para. 714). The emphasis on spontaneity posits that prescribed images are at best unnecessary and at worst harmful, and envisions a new world where “there is no reason why the mature individual, progressing towards Self-hood, should employ images of an overtly religious character” (Palmer, 1997, p. 160). At the root of “selfhealing” is the requirement that imaginal symbolic forms must be “alive” in the individual and collective psyche to be effective. As Jung (2021) admitted, a symbol, even if prescribed, will function so long as “the unconscious willingly flows into these forms,” while if the symbol has

become calcified, “many lives are broken because the living unconscious can no longer enter into the sacred form” (p. 111). Whether an image is alive depends more upon the individual than whether it is prescribed or spontaneous.

In fact, the idealized psychospiritual “maturity” is still rare, given that many people lack access to the forces of the unconscious through dreams, active imagination, or synchronicities to generate their own symbols. While religious images can stagnate over time, they also carry power through space and time, a phenomenon that researcher Shelldrake (1988/2012) called *morphic resonance*, whereby a follower is “tuned in . . . to those who have followed this path before” (p. 319). If one adds in the protective nature of shared symbols, which can mediate the potentially volatile forces of the unconscious, and we start to see a strong case for not completely doing away with prescribed images or yogic-style practices.

Ultimately, the tension can produce approaches embodying a “third” that balances the two. Approaches resembling the disciplined practices of mystical schools such as Buddhist Tantra can be an important accelerant of psychospiritual development. While Jung and Hillman might have us only follow soul at its own pace, Jungian analysts Lee & Marchiano (2022) offered perspective that the Kabbalah (as an example of a mystical school) “has a much more proactive stance, where the ego itself is offered philosophies, methods, symbols, rituals, to create particular inner conditions that make the ego more receptive to the influences of the Self” (24:28). Lee uses the analogy of growing a tomato in a field versus a hothouse, both of which use the natural process of tomatoes, yet the hothouse can work faster and produce more abundance. Using the image of the hothouse, a new path towards the imaginal can be forged: one that recognizes that “the exact form or local name given to the manifestation of the archetype is not of primary importance from a psychological point of view” (Corbett, 2018, p. 174). Instead, flexibility is encouraged, with a focus on the aliveness of the symbols in the seeker’s psyche in that moment. Images—traditional, spontaneous (or both)—can intermingle, providing a modern hothouse for psychospiritual development.

Non-Dual Reality

The second contrast between the Eastern and Western approaches to the imaginal relates to their respective positions towards the realm of pure spirit, which Corbin identified alongside the material and imaginal realms. In depth psychology, the non-dual aspect of reality is hardly mentioned, while it is a core aspect of all Buddhist philosophies through teachings on non-duality and emptiness (also referred to as *śūnyatā*, the void, nothingness, or no-self). Jung typically viewed the non-dual level of reality as outside of his purview as a scientist and empiricist. In his lectures on *The Psychology of Kundalini Yoga*, Jung (1996) kept his commentary to the seventh (crown) chakra brief, noting that it is “merely a philosophical concept with no substance to us whatever; it is beyond any possible experience” and therefore “without practical value for us” (p. 110). Jung (1939/1969) also saw the spirit and imaginal realms as categorically different, delineating “the mystic experience” of “emptying oneself of images and ideas” from “religious experiences . . . based on the practice of envisaging sacred images” (p. 547; *CW* 11 para. 893). In his essay “Peaks and Vales,” Hillman (1975/2015) placed spirit and soul even more directly at odds, stating that “from the viewpoint of soul [imaginal] . . . going up the mountain [toward spirit] feels like a desertion” (p. 81).

These views are in stark contrast to Tibetan Tantric Buddhism, where the imaginal self-generation practices are seen as inseparable from and ineffective without the foundational view of emptiness, which must be practiced prior to self-generation. The essential purpose of the prescribed meditation on emptiness is to negate the possibility of inflation that could arise from incorrectly equating one's ordinary ego consciousness and world with the imagined deity and mandala. Instead, the yogi must first "gather all appearances of the world . . . into emptiness" (Gyatso, 1994, p. 80), the vast creative matrix that is the valid basis for the imaginal. Though Jung and Hillman did not recommend it directly, the practice of dissolution into emptiness accords with their view that soulful imagination must be as free from the ego's interventions as possible.

It seems reasonable to conclude that Jung was artificially restrained in his appreciation of non-dual practices by his adherence to a scientific viewpoint and his perceived limitations of the Western psyche. However, that Jung did not advocate for non-dual practices does not mean that he was against them. As Dourley (2009) pointed out, "Jung's appreciation of the mystics he admired points to depths of the psyche he did not formally incorporate into the model of the psyche in his written work" (p. 231). While it may then be logical to defer to the East given its extensive descriptions of emptiness practices, it is still important to heed Hillman's warning that a flight into the world of pure spirit does not result in a bypass of the equally important realities of the material and imaginal. Instead, one must recall Hillman's (1975/2015) vision in which "the spirit turned toward psyche, rather than deserting it for high places and cosmic love, [and] finds ever further possibilities of seeing through the opacities and obfuscations in the valley" (p. 86).

Conclusion

The growing masses of "spiritual but not religious" people are seeking ways unconstrained by traditional religions and deeper than secular or New Age movements to heal modern consciousness. Healing consciousness cannot happen without healing the mind-matter split, which in turn cannot happen without elevating the often forgotten third realm of the imaginal. Both West and East have important contributions to the effort in the form of active imagination and Tibetan Tantric self-generation practice. This essay has demonstrated that these contrasting approaches can provide essential compensation for each other, creating a generative syncretic dialogue that avoids past cross-cultural pitfalls and creates potential for new, integrative approaches to psychospiritual development for the modern psyche increasingly free of East-West dichotomies.

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