

## *Developing Imagination*

In numerous books and lectures, Rudolf Steiner has described three distinct stages in spiritual development, called Imagination, Inspiration, and Intuition. But each of these three faculties has a threefold character; thus we can identify, abstractly at least, nine levels of consciousness beyond the everyday. Here, however, we will consider just the first three levels in developing Imagination.

In this 'big I' faculty of Imagination we find that there are elements of 'small i' imagination, inspiration, and intuition. We can begin to develop this faculty through exercises such as those described in Steiner's 'An Outline of Esoteric Science' and elsewhere. The first of these are preparatory, intended to develop an objectified consciousness; this is the work of attending to attentiveness.

Attentiveness to anything is of value, but particularly observing the movement of clouds (especially cumulus and cirrus), of weather patterns in general, of bird-flight (especially flocks of birds), or the growth of a plant through the seasonal cycle — each and all of these provide excellent daily practice. We might keep a journal of such observations, from which we can later distil the essential from the non-essential, and begin to recognise the patterns present in the world and in ourselves. Wolfgang Johann von Goethe's 'Italian Journey' is one inspiring example. The notebooks and journal of the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins are an exemplary record of 'spontaneous, sober observation of the external world' (Novalis), which led him to those powerful imaginative experiences expressed in his mature poems. Also, the notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci reveal how thoroughly he undertook such observation; then, amongst his many drawings of clouds and water moving, of birds in flight, we come across this celebrated passage:

if you look at any wall spotted with various stains or with a mixture of different kinds of stones, if you are about to create some scene you will be able to see in it a resemblance to various different landscapes adorned with mountains, rivers, rocks, trees, plains, wide valleys and various groups of hills. You will also be able to see diverse combats and figures in quick movement, and strange expressions of faces, and outlandish costumes, and an infinite number of things which you can then reduce into separate and well-conceived forms. With such walls and blends of different stones it may come about as it does with the sound of bells, in whose clanging you may discover every name and word that you can imagine.

This is an exercise in attentiveness; it is not in the first place what Rudolf Steiner means by Imagination, but rather the kind of imaginative fantasy or reverie, evoked by exact observation, that can strengthen the mind in seeing images. However, in his last sentence, Leonardo seems to be saying something further — suggesting a going-beyond this active fantasy to experience something that appears to arise from within the phenomena.

Then there are specific exercises of a formed image-nature (for instance, the Rose Cross meditation given in 'An Outline of Esoteric Science') through which we can develop and

sensitise our imagination. These are intended to separate out a sense-free image-making capability from the sense-derived mental pictures of our ordinary daylight-consciousness. These pictures are given as verbal instructions, and it is a strenuous activity in the first place to visualise and maintain such images in the mind. But as we persevere with them, we begin to notice that they take on a life of their own. The images we form in this way seem to become alive. And the activity of our picturing in general becomes more vivid.

The result may first become apparent in the character of our sleep-life. We may feel we are in another world during sleep, or have some awareness upon waking of having been immersed in images of another existence. There is this awareness, and it can be quite different from the usual dreams we have, because the strong impressions from this state do not clothe themselves so readily in sense-derived pictures. Or the images, if we can see them clearly, seem less directly related to our daily life. We cannot quite grasp them, it seems, yet they feel so significant; such impressions seem strangely compelling, and we want to see what they are. We might, for instance, experience a sensation of flooding colours which do not assume recognisable shapes. The pattern of sleep also may become disturbed for a time, but will soon settle down. We may even feel we have been 'awake' all night, yet nevertheless be rested in the morning, and during the day notice a greater alertness towards the things around us.

Gradually, in daylight consciousness we may have a sensation of an expansion at the temporal lobes, and a web-like activity extending from there around in front of the forehead. This sensation is exactly opposite to the pressure of an acute headache or of depression. There may be a slight tingling at the temples and across the frontal area of the cranium, and an accompanying feeling of mild bliss. Afterwards, we may feel refreshed, as though having catnapped for a few moments.

These first sensations could be called *putting on the winged helmet of the gods*; there is the sense of expansion from the temporal region, the slightly euphoric mood, a feeling even of being exalted. However, the impressions gained in such moments are initially pale and shadowy, as though we are soaring in mist, seeing fleeting forms continually moving and evaporating around us. The nature of our lives can be such that we do not even notice them.

This is a particular description of sensations accompanying the first stage in developing Imagination. If we now reflect on them, it may perhaps help us identify and orientate ourselves within our own experiences. One thing becomes obvious: considerable inner strength is necessary to achieve any clarity in this initial stage. We can therefore undertake some more exercises to help develop this strength, especially those in which we visualise transformations of structures and forms. Any activity of imagining progressive movement is effective. For instance, we might picture some geometric form that we continually shift through variations of itself (like those fascinating screen-savers on computers). Or we can mentally construct a drawing in strict perspective, and then move the vanishing-points, allowing everything to move in accord with the laws of such constructions. Another interesting exercise is to imagine the movement of the shadows cast by the sun throughout the day. All these efforts can be rewarding and playful practice (and frustrating too, as these images can be so evanescent).

The next step requires courage, however, for we cannot depend for our security on the impressions gained in this way. It is as though we have pressed ourselves assertively towards them, yet we will always notice how they flit away before our concentrated gaze. A mood of loneliness, of desolation, may arise at this point, unless we learn another way of existing in this experience.

In themselves these first fleeting and shadowy impressions offer little that is useful. We must now become receptive, renouncing any desire to force our way into this world. We have to hover, as it were, in a potential nothingness. We erase the images. This can be fearful. We let go of the images, of our wish to find ourselves in relation to them, and simply rest in this sense-free state. We must be courageous when finding ourselves so suddenly 'all at sea'. If we cannot find equilibrium in this state, we can become quite disoriented. A feeling of nausea may accompany this experience.

If we do find balance, then something comes towards us. It may be of a vivid image-nature, but we have the feeling we have not created it ourselves. Rather, it seems to weave itself out of the substance of our activity, forming itself in response to our effort. And it has tonal depth, a quality of inner resonance. We might even experience words, intoning, that seem to articulate some essence of this experience. This is not actual Inspiration as a developed faculty, but rather an inspired element within the faculty of Imagination. This is the second level of consciousness.

One thing we can do preparatory to such experiences is to develop our attentiveness to the nature of sound. In undertaking 'spontaneous, sober observation of the external world', we are not only to look, but to attend in each of our senses; thus, we can direct our focussed consciousness towards specific sounds in our environment, listening to their qualities and tonalities. We can learn to discern distinctions between organic and inorganic sounds, for instance between bird-calls and bells ringing, or water falling, the tones of various metals and woods, between animal and human sounds. Then, as Rudolf Steiner suggests, we give ourselves up to the feeling that arises in response to each particular sound. We learn the difference between cries and calls in the natural world: how one is given to the environment in general, is in fact an expression of the environment, while the other is directed towards a sentient hearer. We might notice how church bells sensitise our hearing, and surmise their purpose in calling congregations to hear the Word. We can choose also to contemplate a word, to place it at the centre of our consciousness for a few minutes every day, sounding it, letting it resonate within us, examining its etymology, and allowing it to speak (for instance, this is how the word *attentiveness* developed into my essay 'Attending to Attentiveness').

Such attentiveness is usefully practised in listening to a waterfall, or surf, or wind moving through trees. Whenever we immerse our hearing in such experiences, we find ourselves entering into an active soundscape. It envelops us in surging and resounding waves, in which we may seem to be drifting awash. We learn to inhabit such listening sensations first in our focussed consciousness, in order to prepare for the feeling of being all at sea when we enter what Novalis called the overlap with our diffuse awareness; for the overwhelming experience of the Imaginative world is of its continuous movement and transformations, and especially so at this second level of consciousness. Here we are in a magic-show; we are immersed in the flux of the elements, and everything is constantly becoming something else.

This quality of movement is not movement *about*, but rather movement *throughout*. Hence, the feeling of nausea, of vertigo, the sense of finding no firm ground beneath our feet. This resembles our experience sometimes of movement in dreams, for instance, when we are trying to escape some terror.

This experience can be so enlivened, so vital in its essence, that we grasp it with real vigour, riding as it were like a surfer amid the motion and noise of stupendous waves. And herein lies another danger, if we remain too self-obsessed in our development. The experiences of the Imaginative realm are always permeated with our personal soul-nature. They are not wholly objective. If we have not become to some extent objective towards our soul processes, then at this point our egotism is actually enhanced, and suddenly it arouses in us a strong feeling of dread. A huge reaction occurs. We feel threatened with annihilation. A monstrous shadow seems about to engulf us, rising up out of the oceanic depths of our lower nature.

If, however, we come to this point in our development, having worked at our self-knowledge, then this third level of consciousness has another quality. We merge with the experience as though it were something familiar. We recognise it as belonging somehow to ourselves. It may be just a momentary realisation, a flash of lightning with the specific atmospheric clarity resulting from it. A sense of blissful union. Or it may be experienced as a stream of light, pouring like a waterfall through the flow-form of our upper vertebrae. Or a bright spike of radiance illumines us. Then we will know something. This is the more intuitional element within the faculty of Imagination.

Throughout this process we remain in the body. The tingling sensation, the sense of drifting free of the body, of flying or hovering, or of being adrift in a stormy ocean, is simply our experience that in Imaginative activity an 'other self', the body of formative forces, has now become inwardly detached from the physical body and to some degree is independent of it. It is even more so as we develop this faculty. This then has consequences when we return to ordinary consciousness, for this etheric body has to permeate and unite with the physical body again, and a distinct sensation of exhaustion, accompanied by our awareness of the physical body's sheer heaviness, may arouse a mood of depression. Knowing its cause, we can contend with it, and in this regard the six basic exercises in soul hygiene recommended by Rudolf Steiner can be especially effective, indeed necessary. Accepting this mood, we may quite suddenly find its transformation, and ourselves enlivened, for the etheric body will in fact have become more activated.

All this represents an initial development in the faculty of Imagination. With practice and cultivation it can become more and more filled with content, permeated with pictures of supersensible reality. They are only *pictures* of reality, but are increasingly resonant and luminous. Then, as the etheric body becomes progressively free of the physical body, for instance, pictures of our life will unfold in a panoramic tableau (an experience attested by people who have had a near-death episode) and through this we are compelled to find a new and conscientious relationship to our own existence. We have to work upon our character, to develop an ethical individualism.

~ John Allison