Chapter 4

The Western Metaphysics of Mental Imagery and Its Clinical Applications

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The imaginal process of which mental imagery is a function provides us with a portal for self-discovery, healing, and creativity. By turning our senses inward, we can tap this inborn capacity to direct us in our lives. Unbound from time and space, this capacity is unconditional and serves as an access point to discovering our liberation and freedom. In this essay I outline the Western spiritual history and contemporary use of these methods as well as the 33 unique functions that I’ve observed in my years as a practitioner.

As clinicians it is vital that we understand the scope of the miseducation and faulty conditioning laid down in early childhood. One of their primary effects is a pattern of beliefs that assumes that our personal and communal freedom is dependent on forces outside ourselves, forces that presumably hold the key to our happiness, well-being, love, truth, power, and fulfillment. The key to achieving our ultimate freedom lies in expanding our worldview beyond materialism to include a spiritual matrix. In contrast to our shared everyday life of “visible reality,” I refer
to this matrix as the Invisible Reality. Others have called it Cosmic Consciousness, Divine Consciousness, God, the Absolute One Mind, or Macrocosmic Reality. A spiritual life is predicated on living as a self-authority free of external dependencies and contingencies that we believe we need to ensure our own independence and safety.

Spiritual life doesn’t follow the rules and regulations of ordinary society whose primary values are the freedom-restrictive functions and applications of will: to take; to keep; to hold onto; to advance at the expense of others; to be great (a function of vanity). These “five dark currents of will” fulfill the desires of the individual with no consideration for the welfare and freedom of others. Spiritual life, on the other hand, reverses the way we use our will. Instead, we utilize our “light currents of will” to give, share, renounce, mentor, and be humble. Here we are self-directed from within, independent of external authorities.

I believe there are four dimensions of this spiritual freedom: faith, love, intuition, and imagination. All of them are unconditional and do not require anything or anyone else to authenticate or validate their existence or truth. This chapter focuses on the fourth dimension: imagination. In contrast to lexical, discursive thought and language, imagination is an unconditional language. It does not depend on a reference to anything in its environment to give it meaning or value or even to make sense out of it.

The Spiritual History of Mental Imagery in the West

The spiritual history of mental imagery and its “parent,” imagination, is the history of the spiritual life as it developed in the Western tradition of monotheism through the patriarchs and matriarchs and the visionary experiences of the prophets and prophetesses, of whom Moses was the first. The Israelite prophets (circa 1200 BCE to 515 BCE) continued to receive sacred messages revealed through visionary experiences. The practices that these visionaries developed were passed down through the schools called “Sons of the Prophets” established by Samuel the Prophet/Judge (see, for example, 1 Samuel 10:2–5 and 2 Kings 2:3–7). These prophets would enter a visionary state where the spirit of God descended upon them (Price 1889). During the time of Rabbi Akiva in the first century CE this tradition was referred to as Merkabah Mysticism, or the Chariot Mysticism of Ezekiel. In the late Middle Ages, this type of practice came to be known as Theosophical Kabbalah or the Kabbalah of Light, founded by Rabbi Isaac the Blind of Provence, France, Jacob Ben Sheshet of Gerona,
Spain, and others. In the 20th century, my teacher of blessed memory Mme. Colette Aboulker-Muscat was a master of this deeply healing and transcendent lineage.

Jesus and Mohammed, the founding prophets of the other strands of the Western monotheistic tradition, continued this visionary tradition as well. Christian champions of imagery include luminaries like Teresa of Avila, Ignatius of Loyola, and Hildegard of Bingen. In Islam, we have the monumental works of Ibn ‘Arabi, Shahāb al-Dīn Yahya ibn Habash Suhrawardi, and the grand Sufi mystical tradition arising from Rumi, the unparalleled love poet.

References to the primary language of image are made in Genesis (1:26), where it is stated that we are made in the image and likeness of God. The creation of the world is considered a work of art created by the Master Painter who created His unmatched visual spectacle. We emulate the Master when we use the corresponding gift we are born with called “imagination,” of which mental imagery is one function. Thus our world was and continues to be birthed through this creative process. As is well documented, many geniuses have discovered solutions to problems through dreams and imagination.

Further along in Genesis we find the celestial messages that were conveyed to the patriarchs and matriarchs: for example, Jacob’s dream of the celestial ladder and Moses’ vision of the burning bush from which he hears the word of God. The most striking example within this tradition is Ezekiel’s description of his inner journey to the throne of God in Ezekiel 1:1-28 (Sherman 2004). Prophesy means “mouthpiece;” a prophet’s mission was to bring the presence and messages of God down to Earth. But what exactly is the metaphysical and time-space nature of this profound imaginational dimension and its messages?

Metaphysics of Imagination: Defining the Divine Language

The imaginal realm is a world of truth and reality as real as the world we occupy physically here on Earth. It is a repository of self-knowledge and wisdom that dwells in the Invisible Reality and is revealed to us where we reside, in our conscious, visible reality. My teacher Mme. Aboulker-Muscat taught that we receive divine images through the channel of communication called “mind.” Mind conveys this information to us through the portal in our human form called “heart,” which channels this information to be stored in the “brain.” I call the imaginal experience “the intelligence of the heart.”
These are some of the most important qualities and functions of this divine language:

- It is a universal, non-discursive, non-verbal, esoteric language that comes to us in pictorial form, as the hieroglyphs of our inner life.

- It is an inner natural language that can be translated and understood like any other exoteric spoken language.

- It communicates truth because it is not subject to the internal and external distortions of conditioning, associations, and other determinants arising from the ideas conveyed by exoteric language. Moreover, it is a free language and remains pure and unconditioned by other ideas and opinions applied to it. This latter point refutes the grievous error made by Freud in his misunderstanding of dreams as a "psychotic process" that require interpretation through associative and logical thought (Epstein 1981).

- This language is the foundation of the inner, silent "conversation between us and Source." The building of the Tower of Babel described in Genesis marks humanity's shift away from its connection to Source and its fall into the multitude of discursive, non-holy languages that reflects the fragmentation and strife between peoples in their quest to become omnipotent.

- The imaginal process bypasses the habitual verbal and logical functions of everyday life and goes directly to "the heart of the matter." It is the language of emotion given form—a pictorial analogue of the emotional state.

- It serves as a mirror or hologram of our thoughts, emotions, perceptions, and sensations. Images are a belief system given form.

- The imaginal process is the vehicle for traversing the vertical axis of freedom to create personal and collective change. Through this primal act of re-membering ourselves, we unite body and soul (Epstein 2004).

Located as it is in the sphere of cosmic consciousness, we can understand imagination as a precious gift that is its own language: it need not be associated with any other field of study like psychology to derive its validity, legitimacy, authenticity, and infinite value. It is our way to have
conversations with God, or with our inner or higher source of wisdom—to reach out and be answered. All types of imaginal activities, be they dreams, hallucinations, reveries, deliriums, visions, or imaginings of any kind are as real as the time-space we occupy and call "objective reality."

It is crucial to develop the ability to discern the difference between what is real and what is true. When I was a first-year psychiatric resident on a locked/closed-door unit, a gentleman came up to me and told me he was Jesus Christ. Ignorant then of what I later came to understand, I immediately labeled him "crazy." What a mistake and missed opportunity! What he was experiencing was real: but was it true as well? In retrospect, I could have asked him whether he had changed the water at lunchtime into wine and the bread into fish. Was he able to become the Master of Christianity right before my eyes? Facing the truth might have been beneficial to him, if painful—but less so than living in the pain of his megalomaniac delusion. The truth can hurt, but that pain is ultimately part of a process of growth, not the destructive, stunting pain of delusion.

Coming to grips with the existence of Cosmic Consciousness does require shifting our fixed ideas of reality and truth. These truths can only be known through our efforts to experiment with the "truisms" of spirituality, to find out for ourselves if they are true. The materialistic sciences are of no help here, because subjective reality is not measurable in quantitative terms: it does not speak the language of natural science. Qualitative precision, however, is useful, especially in defining the language used to describe the imaginal functions.

**Imagery and Fantasy**

Imagery and fantasy, for example, are not the same. Fantasy is time-bound and references past and future. It is repetitive, ruminative, habitual, and wish-fulfilling—whereas imaginal realities are spontaneous, non-historical, and non-self-centered (Epstein 1981). Dreams and waking life are defined differently but are equally real. To say, "Last night I dreamed... but in reality..." is incorrect and is more accurately expressed as, "I dreamed... and in my waking reality..." It requires a growing awareness to break these imprecise habits of speech and thought.

**Imagery and Meditation**

Imagery and meditation are often misunderstood as two interwoven practices, when they are actually two processes of consciousness with separate and distinct characteristics (Brown et al. 1982–1983). Imaginal activity is not meditation. Imagery is a mental activity that plunges us into another level of consciousness in order to make discoveries and
explore other dimensional worlds hidden behind this time-space reality we normally occupy. When I use the word "meditation," I refer to a familiar range of practices that have typically been adopted from the East. These meditational practices emphasize the stilling of thoughts, a dis-identification with the contents of mind, a heightened awareness of aspects of sensations, thoughts, and feelings, a relaxed sense of presence, and a general goal of mental clearing. To imaginate (my term) is altogether different: it means to become one with what is perceived, to actively become the embodiment of our experience of mental images.

**Imagery and Hypnosis**

Likewise, hypnosis differs markedly from imagination, though the lines have been blurred in modern clinical practice. In conventional hypnotherapy, we are led into a deep relaxed state, near sleep, where a new set of suggestions is "programmed" into us. In contrast, in the imaginal process we keep our will at the forefront, and after a light induction, we turn our senses inward in a hyper-attentive state. With our will at the forefront, it allows us to actively explore, discover, and objectify the subjective reality. Thus hypnosis is a process of surrendering our will to the will of an outside authority (the hypnotist), a process in which we are not free but rather remain dependent on the instructions, voice, and suggestions of another.

**Imagery Practices**

As mentioned above, to practice imagery is to dive into the depths of consciousness. The very senses by which we apprehend everyday tangible reality—our five senses of sight, hearing, touch, taste, smell—are turned inward to discover what lies within the subjective realities of the "invisible night worlds" that are obscured by the "visible day world." The senses are the keys that permit this transition to happen. In daily life, our senses bring us in contact with physical reality. We are all well aware from experience that we tend to go where our senses take us. They summon us, fill us with desire, and prompt us to relate to whatever they encounter. In imaginal work, our senses move away from the outer world. As the senses discover other realities, we explore these worlds in the same way we explore the physical world. Here, however, our five senses are attached to a sixth sense called imagination. Imagination is the inner light that guides the senses to pierce into the darkness of subjective reality so that what is there can be discovered. In this paradigm there is no unconscious—there is only
the vast field of consciousness, that which we can illuminate and know for ourselves.

The term imagination actually defines three distinct functions: an inner sensory organ, an inner dimension of existence, and a technique for healing. Most of us consider our subjective reality to be our thoughts, fantasies, and emotions; but these are all conditioned states attached to known external life. What is discovered within has plasticity, mobility, and is ungoverned by the rules and laws that obtain here in day-consciousness—as anyone who has ever dreamed has experienced. This inner world is also limitless, a world without end that serves as an inspirational ground for creativity. We can create wings for our flights of discovery and be transported; we can plummet into the depths of self and achieve transcendent heights. All the potentials of our existence are just waiting for us to probe these unseen and heretofore unknown realms.

Let's take a look at the tools and methods that we use for our explorations. The primary tool is our imaginal sense, and there are three distinct methods I use in working with this sense:

1. Short exercises
2. Waking Dream
3. Guided exercises.

Before distinguishing between the various imagery methods, let me make a distinction between the processes described here and the more commonly used term “visualization.” Visualization usually indicates a mere \textit{visual} picture rather than a full sensory-awareness experience that includes hearing, touching, smelling, tasting, and other bodily sensations. This latter picture is \textit{conjured} purposefully and projected onto the screen of our mind’s eye. Creating an image in this manner is not the same as spontaneously discovering images. For greatest effect, the imagery process is to be freely lived, freely perceived, and freely explored.

\textbf{Short Exercises: A Path to Self-Knowledge}

Short exercises, generally taking from seconds to three minutes, are instructional keys that open the door to our subjective reality where the “explorer” discovers the precise image needed to create change, solve problems, and move toward healing, health, and wholeness. Aimed at solving daily, topical problems in health and relationships, it is the most common type of imagery used in clinical practice.
Short exercises are crafted with specific aims or intentions, and are comprised of detailed instructions to assist the explorer in the discovery process. No long sensory relaxation induction is necessary to enter into the experience because the focus is on the imagery, not on relaxation. The relaxation induction takes only several seconds and consists of a few rounds of long exhalations through the mouth followed by short inhalations through the nose.

While short imagery exercises can be descriptive, they are always jumping-off points for the imager to find his/her own healing images. For example, in the Green Leaf Exercise you'll find later in this chapter, if the imager opens his/her hand and spontaneously finds a fairy, this healing agent would be incorporated into the imagery. The emergence of these spontaneous, organic images indicates that the imagery has taken root in the person. Of course, clinicians need to remain open, without bias or preconception, to whatever is discovered in this realm of freedom.

These self-discoveries provide us with specific instructions for how to proceed or behave in ways that are different than we habitually enact. We recognize that our inner or higher source of wisdom is sending us messages from the subjective reality, messages that are more potent and impactful than those we receive from our outer objective reality. We are given new direction(s) for repairing relationships, creative inspiration, healing illness, changing destructive habits.

For example, in my practice I worked with a young man in his early 30s who was told by his doctors that he had a destructive liver disease that was "autoimmune" (in other words, his body was committing an act of physiological suicide). He was told that he would not live beyond a year because "nothing could be done to save him" (nothing, that is, within the limited scope of the current medical model). My client embarked on a course of imagery practice, and after several months new tests and a biopsy revealed no evidence of the disease process: he had healed.

Not only do our imaginal discoveries create change and revelation, they also act as a diagnostic tool, an inner source of wisdom that provides knowledge beneficial to us. For example, during an imagery exercise undertaken to repair her self-image, a young woman found out that she couldn't see as well from one eye as the other. She had not been aware of any difficulty with that eye or her vision in general. On my recommendation, she had an eye exam, which confirmed the eye weakness. This is but one of a host of instances where an image portends a difficulty that needs our attention or investigation.
Imagery has a mental homeopathic impact, a micro-input that obtains a macro-output or result, in the process of which we become the agent of our own change. The following are some important tips for using this tool:

- Sit upright in a chair with spine erect, rather than lying down or sitting cross-legged as in meditation.

- Make the exercises short, meaning they can be practiced in a short span, from just seconds to one minute. The longer the imagery session, the less power it exerts because our minds can quickly become inured to the process and lose focus. The exercises are essentially short shocks delivered to the system to stimulate its innate healing capacities.

- It is helpful to give ourselves doses of imagery two or three times per day, similar to the way we consistently dose allopathic medications over a timeframe ranging from seven to 21 days.

Of critical importance in generating change and/or healing is the attitude we hold toward the process, rather than the goal or outcome. Concerns about the product negate the possibility of change. Learning that the outcome is not in our hands can be life-changing. We are instead establishing a healing relationship with the self that answers the ancient question attributed to Hillel the Elder, one of the developers of the Talmud: "If I am not for myself, who will be for me?" (Lieber and Scherman 1995, p.43). Practicing in this way builds a respectful, loving, kind, truthful, and generous way of living true to ourselves.

You are invited to try this short imagery exercise for self-healing.

**GREEN LEAF**

Close your eyes. Breathe out three full respiratory cycles with long exhalations through the mouth, each followed by normal inhalations through the nose. Imagine yourself in the backyard of a house in autumn. Leaves are falling from the trees. They are yellow, orange, and red. A leaf falls from the tree and touches you on the head as it falls to the ground. Pick it up and hold it in your left hand. Cover that hand with your right hand. Feel a pulsation there. Uncover it, and see the leaf turning partly green. Cover the left hand again. Feel the pulsation becoming stronger. Uncover the hand again. See that the leaf is now three-quarters green.
Cover the hand once more. Feel the pulsation getting stronger still. Remove your hand and see the leaf now fully green and alive.

Place the leaf over or into any part of your body that needs care or healing. Sense and feel the sap from the leaf entering into the affected area. See and know that the area is completely healed and looks just like the surrounding healthy tissue. Say "Healing" to yourself. Be aware of any feelings, bodily sensations, and images that accompany this. Breathe out and open your eyes.

I recommend that you do this practice for 30–45 seconds once a day in the morning for 21 days in order to realize the greatest benefits.

WAKING DREAM AND GUIDED EXERCISES:
FROM SELF-KNOWLEDGE TO SELF-KNOWING

The other two methods of imaginal practice—Waking Dream and guided exercises—take us from the sphere of self-knowledge supplied by short exercises to the sphere of self-knowing. Self-knowledge provides a fixed endpoint to self-discovery, while self-knowing is an ongoing process of self-discovery. These explorations move us into our inner universe on the vertical axis of freedom.¹

As a therapeutic practice, Waking Dream involves a descent into the deepest levels of self followed by an ascent to transcendent levels of self.² It is an extensive imagery adventure that lasts from one to two hours and is initially undertaken with the assistance of an experienced guide. The portal for entering is through a night dream chosen for its vivid or striking appeal or a vertical element such as a mountain, hill, cave, or staircase. Starting in the conscious waking state, with eyes closed and spine erect, the explorer is taken through a light induction that takes them back into the night dream to either the vivid or vertical element. Once back in the dream, the therapist guides the explorer through the experience. The explorer describes all that s/he sees, hears, feels, and senses. After the discovery phase of the journey, the explorer is led quickly back by the guide along the same route s/he has traversed, and exits the Waking Dream, breathing out once and opening the eyes. Generally, after several such journeys, explorers discover their inner guide (objectively discovered within their subjective reality) and can then enter the waking dream state on their own. The inner guide is a living presence that dwells in another dimensional reality and is unique to each traveler. These guides lead us into and through transcendent reality.
This process of traveling on a vertical axis of freedom reverses our attachment to our habitual and limiting horizontal time-space reality, where our suffering is always lying in wait and death beckons. To my knowledge, Waking Dream as taught by my teacher, Colette Aboulker-Muscat, is the only imaginal method that emphasizes the process of turning the senses inward and the exploration of the vertical axis to explore the depths of self and the heights of transcendence.

In the 20th century, psychologists attempted to integrate psychological theories with the ancient truths embodied in the Waking Dream practice. From my point of view, this mixing devalued the imaginal experience. Most notable among these practitioners were Carl Jung, Robert Desoille, and Hanscarl Leuner. Jung practiced a modified form of Waking Dream: he had his patients “complete” their night dream where it broke off, but without the full experience of exploring the vertical axis. Desoille used pre-defined Freudian themes of early childhood development as “plots” for his patients to explore. For example, men were asked to “Look at a sword (penis)” and women to “Look at/into a purse (vagina)” and then observe what occurred. He called his work “Directed Waking Dream” (Rêve Eveillé Dirigé). Leuner utilized Jungian archetypal “themes” for patients to explore. For example, facing a lion would allow the patient to confront aggression. He called his method “Guided Affective Imagery.” Other contributors of some note have been Wolfgang Kretschmer, Carl Happich, and Roberto Assagioli. In America, Jerome Singer and Jeanne Achterberg were major proponents. However, the singular master of this method in modern times was my teacher, Mme. Aboulker-Muscat. The ancient tradition of the prophetic practices was passed down through her family line; and while she was not a prophetess herself, she maintained an unbroken lineage that had been transmitted through the millennia as far back as King David (Yehezkiel 2003).

The third intermediate technique called guided exercises takes 20–40 minutes to complete. The long guided exercises are forged from the experiences of our daily lives and have specific themes. I refer to them as “guided” because they are less structured than short exercises and thus require a “guide” to explore them.

These exercises can be used alone or as a preparatory process to stimulate striking or unusual night dreams. These night dreams are then used for a Waking Dream. Often, the dreams that emerge from these guided exercises characteristically include some visual vertical component such as a staircase or mountain (Epstein and Hogben 1980). We now have an organically connected experience: guided imaginal exercises → night
dreams → Waking Dream. All unfold beautifully from within, free of biases or external influences, and form a road to personal freedom.

Examples of guided exercises follow. Some contain a vertical descent or ascent, but it is not a necessity as in Waking Dream explorations.

- Find three doors in front of you: one to the left, one in the center, one to the right. Choose one spontaneously, go through it, and explore what you discover there.
- Find a key in an open space, locate a door it opens, and go inside.
- Descend into a meadow, find a flower, and enter into it through the stem.
- Enter a library and select a book to make a discovery about the self.
- Clean a room and rearrange it to cleanse the self.
- Find your way out of a dark pit or similar depression/hole/cave.
- Enter a labyrinth using a ball of red thread to mark the way. Make your way to the center to find something of primal importance. Follow the thread to exit the labyrinth (Epstein and Hogben 1980, p. 279).

In closing, I’d like to share a list of the 33 functions of mental imagery and imagination that I have discovered to date. This may help clinicians expand their conception of imagery so that it can become a limitless source of inspiration.

1. Healing physical, mental, or emotional disturbances (such as tumors, depression, or infections)
2. Rapidly relieving pain
3. Changing injurious conscious beliefs
4. Uncovering and de-creating hidden sabotaging beliefs
5. Ending slave mentality
6. Removing the inner terrorist
7. Reversing ingrained patterns of thought, mood, or behavior
8. Restoring balance after stressful shocks
9. Sourcing self-regulation internally, not externally
10. Ending “false emergencies” derived from our miseducation and faulty conditioning

11. Amplifying the potential that allows learning to emerge from within

12. Learning to trust oneself

13. Aligning with one’s life path

14. Getting “to the bottom” of any issue

15. Feeling more alive

16. Accessing the passion to serve

17. Removing resistance to success

18. Living creatively

19. Manifesting what one needs

20. Clarity in decision-making

21. Optimizing learning capacity

22. Fulfilling sought-for aims or intentions

23. Bringing closure to the personal past

24. Resolving past or present relationship challenges

25. Understanding dreams

26. Learning morphological significance (face-reading: the external image)

27. Ending the pain of interpersonal competition

28. Ending isolation through connecting to a supportive universe

29. Reflecting and facilitating freedom for others

30. Learning to lead

31. Knowing the self by descending into the deepest layers

32. Cleansing our errors

33. Realizing the transcendent-spiritual dimensions of self to discover Self
All of these imaginal experiences allow us to deeply discover hidden and unrecognized aspects of ourselves that when brought to light can inform our lives in new ways and guide us toward wholeness.

ENDNOTES
1. Consult the writings of Eliot Wolfson, Joseph Dan, Moshe Idel, and Gershom Shalom for background information on these visionary traditions.
2. For more clinical examples, I refer the reader to my book Healing Visualizations.
3. I have explicated this method in detail in my book Waking Dream Therapy.
4. In addition to Ezekiel’s journey, other examples of transcendent experiences include: St. Teresa De Avila’s vision of the crystal globe in the shape of a castle, described in The Interior Castle; and Muhammad’s ascent to the heavens in his “Night Journey” where he speaks with God.

References


