

# The Purpose Octagon - Module 5

## A Primer on Soul + Imagination

...follow the epiphany that reveals the soul to itself as a being of light whose presence illuminates the world -  
Tom Cheetham, *Imaginal Love*

In the following weeks you will be offered several methods for finding your purpose through contacting soul through the Imaginal Realm, including Jungian Journaling, Soul-centric Dreamwork, Entelechy Process, Ocean Cave Meditation, SoulQuest, Niche Tree Meditation, and the 10 Years Process. In a future module (#7) you will be given criteria to help you discern whether what you receive during these experiences is truly the Imaginal Realm of Soul or simply wishful thinking.

Module #5 has two parts. The first part is to listen to the Module #5 recording of the Entelechy Meditation. There is no handout needed, just listen to the audio. The second part of module #5 is this primer. It differs from the other handouts in that it is a philosophical introduction to an understanding the nature of Soul-encounter and the Imaginal Realm. Enjoy!

### Home Practice 5:1

This week you will use the “Entelechy” guided meditation. Follow the instructions on the recording.

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Does your life taste like weak tea? Is there a thin, blandish pall hanging over your days? If you long for a soul-infused life, what options do you have? As we examined in Module 4, you have three main choices: refuse the call; engage in deductive discovery; or engage in Soul-encounter. We reviewed the first two in the last module. Now we will turn our attention to the preeminent choice of Soul-encounter: superior in its spiritual depth, its ability to grow a life from wholeness, and its efficacy in making a difference in the world.

This primer will offer ten key concepts for understanding Soul-encounter and the Imaginal Realm. Through slow reading and consideration of each of the ten keys you will gain a theoretical understanding of Soul-encounter. If philosophy is not your thing, feel free to skip the following tangle of psychoactive concepts. But before you do, consider these words of twelfth century mystic and philosopher Suhrawardi: “There is no true philosophy which does not reach completion in a metaphysic of ecstasy, nor mystical experience which does not demand a serious philosophical preparation.”

Let's start with a brief definition of Soul-encounter: *Soul-encounter is a moment of mystical communication with Soul.* A slightly longer definition of Soul-encounter is as follows:

*Soul-encounter is a mystical, trans-rational experience of Soul experienced through the present moment revelation of the symbols and images of your mythopoetic identity.*

This primer will provide you a preliminary understanding of the definition above. My use of the words *Soul*, *Imaginal Realm*, and *Soul-encounter* owes a boundless debt to a great many sources, not the least of which are found in the Sufi tradition (Ibn 'Arabi, Shihab Suhrawardi, A.H Almaas), depth psychology (Carl Jung, James Hillman, Bill Plotkin), indigenous wisdom (Black Elk, Malidoma Somé and the Vision Quest ceremony) and, perhaps most importantly, the mystic Islamic scholar Henri Corbin and his preeminent interpreter Tom Cheetham. Though most of the teachings presented here come from these sources, what follows does not attempt to always adhere to their thinking. Instead, a conscious choice was made to emphasize certain layers of meaning in the literature over others.

**Important Note:** The intention of this primer is to help you catch the scent of Soul, the perfume of the Imaginal Realm. No book, let alone a ten page introduction like this one, is adequate to the task of describing spiritual realities. Confusion and disorientation are to be expected. We hope that this distilled introduction will whet your appetite to read some of the authors mentioned above.

### **Ten Key Concepts**

1. A cosmology of Soul & Imagination.
2. Soul is a verb, not a noun.
3. Two spiritual journeys: Spirit and Soul.
4. The Imaginal Realm.
5. Imagination is the prevailing power of Soul.
6. The Imaginal is a mode of being.
7. Images and symbols are the vocabulary of Soul.
8. The preeminent act of the inspired Imagination is prayer.
9. Soul-encounter is a mystical communion.
10. Contact with the Imaginal is the root of Soul-infused activism.

### **1. A Cosmology of Soul & Imagination**

I am proposing an understanding of the universe, a cosmology, based upon the *experience* of three worlds: Spirit, Ego, and Soul. This cosmology holds that to experience wholeness of the self (and the world from which we are inseparable), one must engage the Soul and its primary power - the Imaginal Realm. Without the Imaginal Realm of Soul, we have a bifurcated universe, a simple (but dangerous) split between Spirit and Matter. This partial view has caused untold problems for the world, and a diminished experience of being human. Imagine a life lived as a thin soup: a nun who denies all sense pleasures, the corporate titan who denies the sacredness of matter and life, a meditator who seeks enlightenment but avoids soul and the call of engagement. Envision a car that can only turn right and go in reverse, and you'll begin to

appreciate how limited a two realm cosmology is. This cosmology (transmitted to us by Corbin, Sufism, Hillman, etc), asks us to carefully place imagination close to the center of reality. Let's see what happens when *you* place the Imaginal Realm near to the heart of your life.

[It is a measure of the depth of the catastrophe to which we have succumbed that we have come to regard the Imaginal realm as just a fantasy in our heads. - Tom Cheetham, \*The World Turned Inside Out\*](#)

## 2. Soul is a Verb *and* a Noun

Unfortunately, no one can tell you what Soul *is*, you have to experience Soul yourself. That doesn't mean that the *concept* of Soul is irrelevant. The idea of Soul is central to a whole range of philosophic and spiritual traditions and yet that very idea of Soul is up for grabs. No definition of Soul can claim hegemony over others. What follows is my own best understanding of something that is ultimately beyond intellectual comprehension. Warning: paradoxes abound beyond this point.

Soul is a *shift* in consciousness, which is why it's hard to write about it. It's a mode of consciousness that is less literal and tangible than discursive thinking. Though Soul is allusive to the mind, we can point out some of its features. First, Soul is a *process*, not an object. Like the words *love* or *God*, the word *Soul* points to an energy and vitality that is distinctly spiritual and active. God isn't a thing; God is a living presence. Love is not a thing; it's the dynamic process of loving. Think of Soul as a *breathing verb*, a flowing, as in the word *Souling*, as if Soul were respiration, like a pair of lungs breathing your purpose. Souling has these specific qualities: alive presence, sensitivity, intelligence and dynamism. If you can feel the truth of this, just a little, you will have taken a major leap forward in your understanding of Soul.

But to view Soul as only a verb misses its fullness. Soul, from a theological and evolutionary perspective is also a noun. You can grow or shrink your Soul. You can harm or support your Soul. Consciousness evolves and so does Soul.

[Entry into the imaginal signals not a change of place, but a change in your mode of being. Just finding one's "soul" is not the discovery of a thing but a deepening of experience. - Tom Cheetham, \*Imaginal Love\*](#)

## 3. Two Spiritual Journeys: Spirit and Soul

Soul is not monolithic: it is mutable, dynamic, vigorous and energetic. It is not a thing or a static object residing inside of yourself. Soul moves, changes, has moods. Soul is an alive conscious presence. You can experience Soul's potentialities, but never reach the limit of Soul. Soul refers to the spiritual journey that is often experienced as *down and in*, distinct from classical enlightenment, which is sometimes experienced as *up and out*. Soul refers to what is unique about you at a trans-egoic level, whereas "spirit" refers to the great mystery that permeates (yet stands "above") everything. Soul's concerns include purpose, evolution and the world. Spirit isn't "concerned" about *anything*, it simply rests as the *timeless presence of awareness* now. Soul is engaged, passionate and active. Spirit floats above (and through) it all, abiding as itself.

Soul wants results. Spirit is more detached. Thomas Berry wrote that what we need even more than transcendence is “inscendence”, a burrowing into the depths of our Soul.

Soul likes intimacy; spirit is uplifting. Soul gets hairy, spirit is bald. Spirit sees, even in the dark; soul feels its way, step by step, or needs a dog. Spirit shoots arrows; soul takes them in the chest. William James and D.H Lawrence said it best. Spirit likes wholes; soul likes eashes. But they need each other like sadists need masochists and vice versa. - James Hillman, *The Dream and the Underworld*

#### **4. The Imaginal Realm**

Consider that the imaginal is an organ of perception. Further, consider that this organ of perception isn't just a human capacity but a fundamental faculty of the living universe. Is *sight* a faculty of humankind (and other species) or a faculty of the cosmos? I say, the cosmos is “sighted”. Is *hearing* a capacity of humanity (and other species) or a capacity of the universe itself? I say the cosmos is auditory (or *sounding*, or *listening*). Is *imagination* a phenomenon of humanity or a phenomenon of the cosmos? I say, the cosmos is ceaselessly imagining. It's vital to conceive of the possibility that it is not we who ‘produce’ imagining, rather, *it is imagining that produces us*.

To make sense of the active Imagination, to place it in its proper context, an entire cosmology is required. It will not do to attempt to stress the importance of Imagination in human life by simply adding it onto a modern view of reality as a kind of appendage and speaking naively of the importance of the role of Art in our lives. It must be understood as an integral part of the whole of the cosmos if there is any chance of grasping its full import. Without an appropriate cosmology we are subject to illusion, error, and spiritual catastrophe...we who see Imagination as an [exclusively] human faculty cannot help but regard it as in some sense distinct from the Real. - Tom Cheetham, *The World Turned Inside Out*

#### **5. The Imaginal is the Prevailing Power of Soul**

A fundamental feature of Soul lies in its capacity for deep imagination. By “imagination”, I'm not referring to what we usually consider daydreaming or fantasy. Routine daydreaming and fantasy emanate from ego, a “head-driven” space. Fantasy and daydreaming are more about *creating*, whereas imagination, as I am using the term here, is more about *surrender*. For our purposes, when we speak about imagination we are referring to the *Imaginal Realm*, the creative source of artists and poets, and of many types of mystical experience that are specifically about purpose (as opposed to classical enlightenment.) What follows are five core principles regarding the imaginal. Each of them would require at least a few pages to be adequately explored, which is beyond the scope of this primer. The intention here is to give you an adequate “psychic shock” to clear a space for reawakening a faculty that has possibly been asleep for quite some time. Let yourself be drawn into “conversation” with these notions...letting your imagination find its own meanings in the distilled notions below.

- ❖ Soul is the repository of the image at the center of your being: the image of your deepest purpose.
- ❖ Imagination is a function or transformational activity of the Soul, that deepens you, “cooks” you into the richness of your purpose.
- ❖ Engaging the Imaginal Realm is a form of creative perception on a par with thinking, feeling and sensing: they are all types of knowing.
- ❖ Imagination is a structural feature (part of the fabric) of the cosmos, just as are matter, life, and self-reflective consciousness.
- ❖ Imagination is the creative capacity of Soul to communicate your purpose. Once engaged, the Imaginal Realm is the backdrop for revelations concerning your purpose.

What the soul suddenly visualizes is its own archetypal Image, that Image whose imprint it simultaneously bears within it, projects and recognizes outside of itself. - Henri Corbin, *Avicenna, Man of Light*

## 6. The Imaginal is a Mode of Being

To what is human presence present?

- Henri Corbin

The way we experience our purpose is dependent on the mode of being (aka, “mode of presence”) we bring to the inquiry when we ask “What is my purpose?” Your assumptions about the world and your role in it provide the scaffolding for the way you experience life. These assumptions (your beliefs or views) and the *way you meet the world* direct your awareness into a distinct mode of being. Your mode of being shapes what you experience. The role we assume in the presence of another human being affects our mode of being. The warrior role on the battlefield gives a completely different texture to our mode of being when compared to the parenting role in the nursery. One’s mode of presence doesn’t rest solely upon a role, but how we approach a moment. Do we approach it primarily through our imagination, our emotions, as pure conscious awareness, etc? If your mode of presence is rooted in the Imaginal, this will have a profound effect on your ability to discern your purpose. What then is the Imaginal mode of being? James Hillman writes, “Imagination is something descended into our lives from an imaginal realm.” The Imaginal Realm is a “fifth” realm alongside the material, conceptual, emotional and spiritual (non-dual) realms. The twelfth century Islamic philosopher Suhrawardi described the Imaginal Realm as operating like an “isthmus”, an intermediary realm between the worlds of the physical and the spiritual. He wrote of the Imaginal Realm that it is there “...that the various kinds of autonomous archetypal Images are infinitely realised...The pilgrim rising from one degree to another discovers on each higher level a subtler state, a more entrancing beauty, a more intense spirituality, a more overflowing delight.” Most importantly, there are “archetypal images” that reveal our purpose and that are only available through the Imaginal Realm. In other words, when approaching the inquiry, “What is my purpose?” your mode of being is critical to your success. It can be challenging to the intellectual mind to conceive of a multitude of modes of being. The rational mind often finds it difficult to think its way to clarity

regarding different worlds of awareness: spiritual, imaginal, or emotional. For now, just allow the possibility that there is an imaginal realm, and that approaching it requires a shift in your being or presence.

The mode of presence assumed by the philosopher by reason of the system that he professes is what, in the last analysis, appears as the genuinely situative element. ...it is this mode of presence that must be disclosed...every mode of understanding corresponds to the mode of being of the interpreter. - Henri Corbin, *Avicenna, Man of Light*

## **7. Images and Symbols are the Vocabulary of Soul**

The preeminent language of Soul is images. In his book *Soulcraft*, Bill Plotkin writes, “The seed of our destiny waits for us in the form of an image. Images are the most direct window into our psyches.” The most efficient way to connect with Soul is through symbols, sensations, feelings, illuminations and images, rather than through words, thus bypassing our logical thinking minds. Interestingly, we say that Soul reveals itself in images, but in an enigmatic way it also *consists* of images. Plotkin writes, “Images are not only the language of the soul but also the substance of soul.” Once we receive the image we must then live with the image, allowing it to do its tidal work upon us. Similar to the way we live with the psychoactive image of a painting, the images shown to us by Soul need to be dwelled upon, so that the image’s hidden subtleties can rise to the foreground of awareness. Just as good art can change you, an image from Soul can transform your life.

Man is primarily an imagemaker and our psychic substance consists of images; our being is imaginal being, an existence in imagination...we live in a world that is neither “inner” nor “outer.” Rather the psychic world is an imaginal world, just as image is psyche. Paradoxically, at the same time, these images are in us and we live in the midst of them. The psychic world is experienced as inside us and yet it encompasses us with images. I dream and experience my dreams as inside me and yet at the same time I walk around in my dreams and am inside them. Because our psychic stuff is images, image-making...is a royal road to soul-making. - James Hillman, *Re-visioning Psychology*

## **8. The Preeminent Act of inspired Imagination is Prayer**

The aim of prayer is for you to be *taken in*, to dissolve in Soul. In its essence, prayer is a powerful means for softening (and then dissolving) the experience of separateness between you and Soul. Prayer must be rooted in your deepest driving desire to live on fire with purpose, otherwise it is just words. Without a blaze of intense emotional longing, without the courage to surrender to the ache, the cry, the lament for a profoundly meaningful life, your prayer will lack the requisite power to evoke a Soul-encounter. Eventually, prayer can melt the duality of separateness. If the prayer is strong and sustained, eventually there is no “I” making the prayer. There is only prayer, with no subject to pray to an “object” called Soul. While this isn’t identical to “classical enlightenment” (the melting of ego and spirit) it is similar: in both cases there is a dissolving between the subject and object and you and Soul are revealed as one.

A human being has two faces. Most people know one face, what is called the face of the day. Human beings also have a secret face, the face of the night. The Guest has arrived when the face you face the world with is the face of the night, the face of mystery, magic, and passion. The Secret, the Guest, will not arrive unless everything kneels in prayer to it. Everything has to kneel in prayer - your mind, your heart, your body, your soul, your essence, the universe, God. Everything has to kneel, ready to be vanished. And you don't pray to it for anything for yourself; you can only pray to it absolutely. You pray only for annihilation. That is the only prayer. The prayer is a passionate love, so passionate in its sweetness that it will burn you up completely. - A.H Almaas, *Diamond Heart Book V*

### **9. Soul-encounter is a Mystical Communion**

Soul-encounter is the experiential revelation of the images and symbols that arise out of the power of Soul, that disclose your deepest purpose. It is a *communion* because there is an intimate communication between you and Soul. It is a *mystical* communication because Soul is inherently trans-rational: bypassing cognition in favor of senses, images and feelings (which is distinct from the mystical experience of nonduality, which is a melting of the subject and spirit into unitive intimacy). Soul-encounter is a direct communication from Soul, vs. collecting indirect inferences from your history. You will know you've experienced a Soul-encounter when the experience is *good, true and beautiful all at the same time*.

The openings require a loosening of your attention and relaxing of your intentions - you have to stop grasping at the world. You have to come to feel that nothing is literal - nothing is only what it seems on the surface. Everything has depth, breadth, and extended reference. - Tom Cheetham, *Imaginal Love*

### **10. Contact with the Imaginal is Activism**

Humanity has amputated a vital organ of perception: the Imaginal. We've become content to give over to poets and artists a whole domain of human knowing, not realizing how impoverished we've become in the process. Without the power of the Imaginal Realm, the various facets of your purpose - like Vision, Gifts, Message and Mission - are weakened. If you really want to be an impactful human being and a demonstration of love *at full strength*, then living in the Imaginal Realm becomes essential. Einstein famously wrote, "We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them." From where can we solve our problems? What kind of "thinking" is adequate to address our problems? Is there a type of contemplation that has the power to be creative, powerful, and a form of evolutionary activism? The path of Soul-encounter through contact with the Imaginal Realm is the fountainhead of true activism. As Hillman notes, the work to re-establish the reality of the imaginal world,

"...can be seen as political action of the first order: it is meeting terrorism, fanaticism, nihilism at their roots in the psyche." - Tom Cheetham, *Imaginal Love*