

Through a Blue Chasm: Coleridge, Wordsworth and the Buddha on Imagination

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Abstract

Sangharakshita and Subhuti's article of 2010, 'Re-imagining the Buddha', explores the importance of imagination in the spiritual life. Dhivan explores the background to that article, which is the thought of Coleridge and German idealist philosophy. He goes on to evoke the illustrate the nature of imagination with reference to *The Prelude*, the poetic biography of Coleridge's friend Wordsworth. He then explores how this romantic conception of imagination might be found in the teachings of the Buddha recorded in the Pali canon, especially in the term *sati*, usually translated 'mindfulness'.

¹ My thanks to Vishvapani and Sudarshini for helpful comments on an earlier version of this article that first appeared in *Shabda*, November 2011.

Introduction

In his 2010 paper ‘Re-Imagining the Buddha’, Subhuti tells us that:

To live the Buddhist life, to become like the Buddha, we must imagine the Buddha. The goal must be embodied in our imaginations, our deepest energies gathered in an image of what we are trying to move towards.²

Subhuti goes on to explore the nature and place of the imagination in the Dharma life. But what exactly is meant by ‘imagination’ here? Subhuti draws on the English poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge for a definition and discussion.³ Although Coleridge was not a Buddhist, his bold conception of the power and scope of imagination epitomises the value placed upon this faculty by poets and philosophers in Europe, especially those connected with the Romantic movement. Subhuti explains how Coleridge’s conception of imagination has long inspired Sangharakshita, but he offers only a brief account of Coleridge’s conception.

In this article I will explore Coleridge’s conception of imagination, in order to illuminate the significance of imagining the Buddha as it is discussed in the early Pali texts. In Part I below, I will explain what Coleridge meant by ‘imagination’, as he uses the term in a philosophical sense derived from German idealism. But Coleridge’s ideas about the imagination are also intimately bound up with those of his friend, the poet William Wordsworth. Hence, to illustrate Coleridge’s ideas concerning the imagination, in Part II of this article I will consider Wordsworth’s poem *The Prelude*, because this poem not only tells us *about* the imagination, but also *shows* it to us. In his long verse autobiography, Wordsworth tries to communicate something of his spiritual development, especially the interplay of nature and imagination throughout his childhood and youth.

² Subhuti, ‘Re-Imagining the Buddha’, 2010, p.1.

³ Subhuti, ‘Re-Imagining the Buddha’, 2010, p.5.

The poem culminates in a tremendous vision on the top of Mount Snowdon, which symbolizes how the power of imagination can reach to the truth. This poetical exploration allows us to ask what ‘imagining the Buddha’ might involve. In Part III I will venture some thoughts about where we can find the idea of imagination in the teaching of the Buddha as it is preserved in the Pali canon. While we do not find an explicit conception of ‘imagination’ of the sort that we find in Coleridge and Wordsworth, and which is recommended by Subhuti and Sangharakshita, we do find evidence there that the early Buddhists valued imagination and engaged in imagining the Buddha. But they did so after making an important distinction between imagination as proliferation (*papañca*) and imagination as awareness (*sati*), a distinction not made by Romantic poets.

I

We normally use the word ‘imagination’ to mean the capacity to represent things to ourselves which are not actually present.⁴ But we can also use the word ‘imagination’ in a more philosophical sense to mean the capacity of the mind to synthesize sense impressions into perceptions,⁵ a capacity which also allows us to imagine what is not present to our senses. Coleridge and Wordsworth were very aware of this deeper, philosophical sense of imagination, and understood their own artistic creativity as an expression of this mysterious power of the mind.

Coleridge’s thinking about the imagination is summed up in two wonderful and perplexing paragraphs in Ch.13 of the *Biographia Literaria*:

⁴ ‘The power or capacity to form internal images or ideas of objects and situations not actually present to the senses, including remembered objects and situations, and those constructed by mentally combining or projecting images of previously experienced qualities, objects, and situations...’ (OED, ‘imagination’, 1a).

⁵ ‘...Also (esp. in modern philosophy): the power or capacity by which the mind integrates sensory data in the process of perception’ (OED *ibid.*).

The IMAGINATION then I consider either as primary, or secondary. The primary IMAGINATION I hold to be the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception, and as a representation in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM. The secondary I consider as an echo of the former, co-existing with the conscious will, yet still as identical with the primary in the *kind* of its agency, and differing only in *degree*, and in the *mode* of its operation. It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create; or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still at all events it struggles to idealize and to unify. It is essentially *vital*, even as all objects (*as* objects) are essentially fixed and dead.

FANCY, on the contrary, has no other counters to play with, but fixities and definites. The Fancy is indeed no other than a mode of Memory emancipated from the order of time and space; and blended with, and modified by that empirical phenomenon of the will, which we express by the word CHOICE. But equally with the ordinary memory it must receive all its materials ready made from the law of association.⁶

These ideas need some explaining. Coleridge meant to explain them, but he never got round to it. This is typical of him – anyone who has read a biography of Coleridge will have grown accustomed to a sense of awe about his genius, but also sadness at his procrastination and failure.⁷ Nevertheless, what Coleridge meant can be unpacked with the help of a little poetry.⁸

Let us begin with the distinction of imagination from what he calls ‘fancy’. These days, the word ‘fancy’ has a rather superficial connotation, but in Coleridge’s day it was used simply as another word for ‘imagination’. (The word ‘fancy’ is a

⁶ *Biographia Literaria*, ed. Engell and Bate, pp.304–5. My references below are to this edition.

⁷ See for instance Richard Holmes, 1989–98. Holmes has also written a useful small introduction, *Coleridge*, 1981.

⁸ What follows is highly dependent on Engell’s Introduction to *Biographia Literaria*, pp.lxvi–cxxxvi, and his *The Creative Imagination: Enlightenment to Romanticism*, 1981.

contraction of ‘fantasy’, from Greek *phantasia*, the Latin equivalent of which is *imaginatio*.) In Ch.4 of *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge says that, though these words in ordinary English mean much the same thing, we can use them to distinguish between two kinds of imagination. As he explained it: ‘The Fancy brings together images which have no connection natural or moral, but are yoked together by the poet by means of some accidental coincidence’;⁹ and he illustrates what he means by quoting some lines from Samuel Butler’s mock-heroic epic poem *Hudibras*:

The sun had long since in the lap
Of Thetis taken out his nap,
And like a lobster boyl’d, the morn
From black to red began to turn.¹⁰

Coleridge chooses these lines because the associations Butler makes are so far-fetched: the sun taking a nap = sunset; in the lap of Thetis = going down over the sea; the change in colour of a boiled lobster = the lighting up of the morning sky. There is no deep connection between the sunset and the sun’s taking a nap in Thetis’ lap; the two things are associated only through their being similar. However, although Coleridge denigrates ‘fancy’, it is fairer just to acknowledge it as one way in which the imagination works.¹¹ In Shakespeare’s play *Romeo and Juliet*, for instance, the character Mercutio describes Queen Mab like this:

She is the fairies’ midwife, and she comes
In shape no bigger than an agate stone
On the forefinger of an alderman,
Drawn with a team of little atomies

⁹ From Coleridge, *Table Talk* (23 Jan 1834), quoted in *Biographia Literaria*, pp.84–5.

¹⁰ *Hudibras* II.ii.29–32, quoted in *Biographia Literaria*, p.85.

¹¹ In Ch.XII of *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge is critical of Wordsworth, who in Coleridge’s opinion did not sufficiently distinguish fancy from imagination. But a strict distinction of these faculties is in practice only theoretical.

Athwart men's noses as they lie asleep...¹²

We would surely say that this is all very imaginative, even delightful. However, upon reflection, there is no deep connection between, for instance, a fairy Queen and an agate stone on an alderman's finger, and therefore in Coleridge's terms, Shakespeare is indulging in fancy rather than using imagination. But this points to what I regard as a problem with Coleridge's distinction. Although Coleridge's distinction of fancy and imagination is useful, there are some instances of what he would call 'fancy' which are rather profound. For instance, the Buddha often used similes in his teaching, such as the simile of the raft (= the Dharma) and the simile of the ancient path to the ruined city (= the eightfold path).¹³ In Coleridge's terms, these are examples of fancy rather than imagination. This goes to show that even though some examples of fancy can be said to consist merely in the mechanical or routine association of images, without deeper significance, there are also examples of associated images – such as the Buddha's similes – which resonate together in a mutually enhancing way. The image of discovering an ancient path gives rise to certain feelings – an excitement in the belly, a sense of wonder – that enriches the concept of the eightfold path. I do not think it necessary, therefore, to follow Coleridge in denigrating what he calls 'fancy'.

Nevertheless, there is a positive point in Coleridge's distinction of fancy and imagination, and that is to draw attention to a deeper and more significant kind of imagination at work in certain circumstances. This kind of imagination does not simply create connections through the power of association (which is 'fancy'), but discovers symbols which in a much deeper way unite experience into a felt sense of deeper meaning. The image of the lotus is such a symbol in Buddhism. The image of a flower

¹² Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, I.iv.59–63. 'Atomies' are skeletons.

¹³ The simile of the raft occurs in the Alaggadūpama-sutta, *Majjhima-nikāya* 22; the simile of the old path leading to the ancient city occurs in the Nāgara-sutta, *Saṃyutta-nikāya* 12:65.

that lifts into bloom out of muddy water is not just a simile, but participates in the experience to which it points.¹⁴

The ability both to create and to understand such symbols is what Coleridge calls ‘imagination’. Coleridge distinguishes ‘primary’ and ‘secondary’ forms of it. It is not obvious from his definition, but the creative imagination of the artist is the *secondary* imagination, which ‘dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create’. To understand Coleridge’s discussion of this symbolic imagination, we have first to understand what he means by *primary* imagination – ‘the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception’ – of which the secondary imagination is an echo. What Coleridge means by ‘primary imagination’ is a kind of philosophical psychology, and is based particularly on the thought of Kant and Schelling, although philosophising about imagination goes right back to Aristotle.¹⁵

Coleridge’s ‘primary imagination’ can be thought of as that unconscious power which translates our sense-impressions into perceptions of a world. That is to say, the idea of ‘primary imagination’ is a philosophical explanation of something that ordinarily we take completely for granted. We all experience a world of objects outside of ourselves. But how does this experience arise? Our sense-organs gather information quite passively; our eyes, for instance, supply us with a constant stream of colours and shapes. But we do not actually experience this stream of colours and shapes; instead, we experience a coherent world of objects. When we see a certain shape we know it is a mug, and we know that the mug has a back and an underside even though we cannot see them. Coleridge’s primary imagination is the unconscious power continually exercised by the mind that

¹⁴ The image of the lotus is ubiquitous in Buddhist scriptures; a famous example occurs in the story of Brahmā requesting the Buddha to teach, in which the Buddha has a vision of living beings as lotuses, at various stages of growth (*Majjhima-nikāya* 26; *Saṃyutta-nikāya* 6:1).

¹⁵ Coleridge freely plagiarised his philosophical ideas, especially from the Introduction to Schelling’s *System of Transcendental Idealism*.

actively creates the living world of experience out of a mass of sensation.

We can occasionally notice this power in action. You might remember how photographs used to be reproduced in newspapers. If one looked closely it was clear that the image was simply an arrangement of black or grey dots. That was all it was. But without any effort we would see an image of a place or a person, not a collection of dots. This kind of perceiving is ‘primary imagination’ at work, an unconscious synthesizing power, creating an image of a human being out of a few grey dots. This power of perception is unconscious, in the same way that a bird of prey soaring upon the thermals is unconscious of what it is doing – the bird pays no attention at all to the workings of the strong muscles that are constantly working to keep it in flight, but is instead engrossed in its soaring, its courting or its surveying. When we flightless humans are walking, we are similarly barely aware of the continuous workings of muscles that keep us in a state of dynamic balance. We are even less aware of the mental processes that synthesize a world of perceptions out of sensations. It might seem odd to call this power ‘imagination’. Perhaps it is easier to call it something else, like perception, or apperception – the process of fitting particular perceptions into our conscious experience.¹⁶ The philosopher Immanuel Kant usually calls it ‘understanding’ (*Verstand*).¹⁷ However, by calling this power ‘imagination’ we can more easily follow Coleridge’s train of thought, which connects the mind’s power of perception (‘primary imagination’) to what it is that makes great art (‘secondary imagination’).

¹⁶ ‘any act or process by which the mind unites and assimilates a particular idea (esp. one newly presented) to a larger set or mass of ideas (already possessed), so as to comprehend it as part of the whole’ (OED ‘apperception’ 3a).

¹⁷ Kant writes, in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, p.93, that ‘If the *receptivity* of our mind... is to be entitled sensibility, then the mind’s power of producing representations from itself... should be called the understanding.’

Coleridge's idea of imagination is related to German idealist philosophy, so let us briefly characterise this way of thinking about human experience. In the thought of Kant, Schopenhauer and so on, our experience is characterised in terms of 'representations' (*Vorstellungen*). When we see a mug, what we see are visual representations in space and time, which are tied together into the sense of the mug's existence. The imagination is that mental power which does the tying together of representations to create a world of experience. Our knowledge of the world is thus mediated by perception and synthesized by imagination.¹⁸ The way that reality depends on the perceiving mind sometimes becomes quite obvious. Suppose that you are in a foreign city, surrounded by people talking in their own language, which you do not understand. You hear only tones and rasps, rapid sequences of small sounds, all meaningless to you. But suppose that two years later you have learned the language, and you no longer hear sounds, but instead words and sentences, human communication. What has changed is your mind. Likewise, primary imagination is that unconscious power that gathers and organizes the chaos of sense-impressions into a meaningful world. So the primary imagination does not *create* objects, but creates the *sense* and *meaning* that we find in the world.

Coleridge goes on to say that the primary imagination is also 'a representation in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM'. Coleridge discusses what he means by this in Ch.12 of *Biographia Literaria*. How do we know that we exist? The answer is that, as self-conscious beings, we simply and directly know it. If we ask how we came to exist as self-conscious beings, the answer, Coleridge might have said, is that we did so within the infinite self-consciousness of the absolute being, which is commonly called God.¹⁹ But self-consciousness is not passive: to know something is to actively posit its existence.

¹⁸ The Yogācāra (or 'Mind-only') school of Buddhist philosophy takes a similar approach to the question of what we can know about reality.

¹⁹ 'Sum quia in deo sum' – 'I am because I exist in God'.

Hence the productive work of our individual (primary) imaginations is really a substation of the creative power of the one infinite mind in which we participate. Whether or not there really is one infinite mind, we can perhaps understand Coleridge to mean that our individual power of imagination participates in and depends upon a universal form of understanding.²⁰ Or better still, Coleridge tells us what he means in his poetry:

And what if all of animated nature
Be but organic harps diversely framed,
That tremble into thought, as o'er them sweeps,
Plastic and vast, one intellectual breeze,
At once the soul of each, and God of all?
(‘The Aeolian Harp’, ll.36–40)

We can now turn to what Coleridge calls the ‘secondary imagination’, the creative imagination of the artist or poet. He says that an artist’s imagination is the same vital active power of combining and unifying as primary imagination, but ‘co-existing with the conscious will’; that is, it is a *conscious* power. The artist is able to consciously deploy this same vast power of imagination in order to produce new forms (music, poetry, painting, etc.) out of sense-impressions, that present sense and meaning in the form of artworks. The creative imagination is, at its best, capable of creating symbols that actively unite the whole living process of nature, and these symbols enable us to enjoy and contemplate existence as a whole, an existence that we understand only through the working of the primary imagination. Being a poet as well as a philosopher, Coleridge finds an image for this conception of the creative imagination:

They and only they can acquire the philosophic imagination, the sacred power of self-intuition, who within themselves can interpret and understand the symbol, that the wings of the air-sylph are forming within the skin of the caterpillar; those only, who feel in

²⁰ Or, as Subhuti puts it, ‘we could define imagination as a power or capacity of the individual, having in it something that is more than the individual’, p.5.

their own spirits the same instinct, which impels the chrysalis of the horned fly to leave room in its involucre for antennae yet to come. They know and feel, that the *potential* works *in* them, even as the *actual* works on them!²¹

Coleridge imagines the philosophical poet as someone whose imagination says ‘wings’ while still creeping in a caterpillar’s body; and he thought of Wordsworth as being exactly such a poet.

II

Some of Coleridge’s best-known poems – ‘Christabel’, ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’ and ‘Kubla Khan’ – have a disturbing, visionary, imaginative quality that is justly celebrated;²² but in fact Wordsworth’s *The Prelude*, written by 1805 (well before the *Biographia Literaria*), illustrates Coleridge’s ideas about imagination much more fully and directly than Coleridge’s own poetry. This is less of a surprise than it may appear, since Wordsworth and Coleridge were at that time close intellectual as well as poetic and personal friends, and Coleridge’s ideas about imagination developed in the warmth of their intimacy.²³ *The Prelude* begins by tracing how imagination develops in the child; the child as an imaginative being is an active explorer of nature and its world, encouraged by joy into fuller existence:

Blessed the infant babe...
 For feeling has to him imparted strength,
 And – powerful in all sentiments of grief,
 Of exultation, fear and joy – his mind,
 Even as an agent of the one great mind,
 Creates, creator and receiver both,

²¹ *Biographia Literaria* Ch.12. An ‘involucre’ is a covering or sheath.

²² See my essay ‘Coleridge at the Border of Midnight’, in *Urthona* 20, and on www.dhivan.net, and also the *Urthona* essays by Ananda and Abhaya on www.urthonaessays.wordpress.com.

²³ Adam Sisman, 2006, movingly recounts the fleeting glory of their friendship.

Working but in alliance with the works
Which it beholds. Such, verily, is the first
Poetic spirit of our human life –
By uniform control of after years
In most abated and suppressed, in some
Through every change of growth or of decay
Preeminent till death. (*The Prelude* (1805), II 237, 269–80)

The child's mind as 'an agent of the one great mind' shows Wordsworth's and Coleridge's faith in how all consciousness participates in the nature of reality as infinite consciousness – the 'infinite I AM'. The child's mind is both 'creator and receiver' of what it beholds: perception is not only a passive reception of external things, but an active and creative participation in reality. This is Wordsworth's understanding of Coleridge's primary imagination, echoed also in Wordsworth's declaration of love for meadows, woods and mountains:

of all the mighty world
Of eye and ear, both what they half-create,
And what perceive... ('Tintern Abbey', ll.106–8)

Here, nature's beauty is not completely external to us, but a product of an active imaginative engagement with the world, spontaneous in children, but rarer in adults, whose imaginations have become defiled through bad education and materialism (or, in earlier days, through poverty).

As Wordsworth grew into youth, nature led his imagination into profounder thoughts, sensing beyond the senses the 'one life' and the unity of all things:

For I would walk alone
In storm and tempest, or in starlight nights
Beneath the quiet heavens, and at that time
Would feel whate'er there is of power in sound
To breathe an elevated mood, by form
Or image unprofaned; and I would stand
Beneath some rock, listening to sounds that are

The ghostly language of the ancient earth,
 Or make their dim abode in distant winds.
 Thence did I drink the visionary power.
 I deem not profitless those fleeting moods
 Of shadowy exultation; not for this,
 That they are kindred to our purer mind
 And intellectual life, but that the soul –
 Remembering how she felt, but what she felt
 Remembering not – retains an obscure sense
 Of possible sublimity, to which
 With growing faculties she doth aspire,
 With faculties still growing, feeling still
 That whatsoever point they gain they still
 Have something to pursue. (*The Prelude* (1805), II 321–41)

The imaginative apprehension of nature as somehow deeply interconnected leads not only to moods of ‘shadowy exultation’, but prompts a sense of ‘possible sublimity’. Wordsworth means that our sense that we can grow and develop as spiritual beings, beyond what we know, is rooted in a recollection, no matter how obscure, of those moments in our early lives when we *felt* ourselves to be a part of the whole, part of the grandeur and mystery of what is; a feeling that belongs to an imaginative groping towards the truth on the part of the still-young soul.

These are some of Wordsworth’s thoughts as an adult about childhood. During his early adult life, imagination emerged from the shadows and revealed its wings directly. In 1790, while walking in Switzerland, he and his friend Robert Jones felt disappointed when they discovered that they had already crossed the Alps, and they trailed dejectedly down the other side of the Simplon Pass. But somehow this experience became transmuted in Wordsworth’s mind when later he wrote about it, into a self-revelation of imagination:

Imagination! Lifting up itself
 Before the eye and progress of my song
 Like an unfathered vapour, here that power,

In all the might of its endowments, came
 Athwart me. I was lost as in a cloud,
 Halted without a struggle to break through,
 And now, recovering, to my soul I say
 ‘I recognise thy glory’. In such strength
 Of usurpation, in such visitings
 Of awful promise, when the light of sense
 Goes out in flashes that have shewn to us
 The invisible world, doth greatness make abode... (*The Prelude*
 (1805), VI 525–36)

It would seem that the vividness of recollection that the poet employed to record his erstwhile wanderings somehow caused the hatching of the visionary power. It overshadowed his ordinary awareness, just as a poem or artwork throws the artist into a blinding euphoria of creativity. And then his memories of his walk down the Pass were usurped, lifted up into symbols:

The immeasurable height
 Of woods decaying, never to be decayed,
 The stationary blasts of waterfalls,
 And everywhere along the hollow rent
 Winds thwarting winds, bewildered and forlorn,
 The torrents shooting from the clear blue sky,
 The rocks that muttered close upon our ears –
 Black drizzling crags that spake by the wayside
 As if a voice were in them – the sick sight
 And giddy prospect of the raving stream,
 The unfettered clouds and regions of the heavens,
 Tumult and peace, the darkness and the light,
 Were all like workings of one mind, the features
 Of the same face, blossoms upon a tree,
 Characters of the great apocalypse,
 The types and symbols of eternity,
 Of first and last, and midst, and without end.
 (*The Prelude* (1805), VI 556–72)

It seems as if Wordsworth had got out a book of holiday-snaps to write up his holiday diary, and in the process had found himself taken up, in vivid recollection, into the world's worship of its own dark mystery. This is secondary imagination, the creative echo of the lively work of perception that had already gone on, and had been lodged like a sleeping chrysalis in the poet's memory.

The last chapter of *The Prelude* culminates in, to use Sangharakshita's phrase, an 'illumined image'.²⁴ It records Wordsworth's ascent of Snowdon in 1791, with the same friend with whom he had walked in the Alps. The friends set out in the middle of an August night with a shepherd as their guide, to see the sunrise at the summit. It was foggy and damp, but near the top they suddenly emerged above the clouds, and were bathed in moonlight. The distant sea was hidden by cloud, and:

from the shore
At distance not the third part of a mile
Was a blue chasm, a fracture in the vapour,
A deep and gloomy breathing-place, through which
Mounted the roar of waters, torrents, streams
Innumerable, roaring with one voice.
... in that breach
Through which the homeless voice of waters rose,
That dark deep thoroughfare, had Nature lodged
The soul, the imagination of the whole.
(*The Prelude* (1805), XIII 54–9, 62–5)

This weird experience of a chasm in the fog, from which flowed the voice of water, became transmuted in the poet's mind into a symbol for imagination:

A meditation rose in me that night
Upon the lonely mountain when the scene
Had passed away, and it appeared to me
The perfect image of a mighty mind,

²⁴ Discussed by Subhuti, p.27.

Of one that feeds upon infinity,
 That is exalted by an under-presence,
 The sense of God, or whatsoe'er is dim
 Or vast in its own being – above all,
 One function of such mind had Nature there
 Exhibited by putting forth, and that
 With circumstance most awful and sublime:
 That domination which she oftentimes
 Exerts upon the outward face of things,
 So moulds them, and endues, abstracts, combines,
 Or by abrupt and unhabitual influence
 Doth make one object so impress itself
 Upon all others, and pervades them so,
 That even the grossest minds must see and hear,
 And cannot chuse but feel. (*The Prelude* (1805), XIII 66–84)

We can read Wordsworth's illumined image in Coleridge's terms. The blue chasm with its voice of waters has become an 'under-presence', a vast and dim power – the primary imagination, revealed here through the image of the dark fracture. The moonlit and transfigured mountain has become a 'mighty mind' feeding upon infinity, symbol of reality transfigured as by the secondary imagination, and everything so pervaded by new meanings that the sight would provoke awe in anyone.

III

Sangharakshita has invited us to consider imagination as the key to the spiritual life, and to consider the practice of imagining the Buddha as a way to connect with the goal of the Dharma life. For Coleridge, the exercise of creative imagination means a conscious use of the power of perception that all of us possess, using it to give birth to new forms and symbols that give artistic expression to the sense and meaning of human existence. And this is a reflexive process: in glimpsing imagination at work, like Wordsworth glimpsing the 'one mind' in waterfalls and mists, we briefly participate in the divine mind, in the flashing forth of

reality's cool, exhilarating, liberating moonbeams. To imagine the Buddha is similarly to participate, to some extent, in the workings of the awakened mind, and to nourish our own 'possible sublimity'.

In early Buddhism, as recorded in the Pali canon, the practice of imagining the Buddha as a means of participating in the awakened mind is discernible, but somewhat obscured by the use of a different conceptual vocabulary. There is no single word in early Buddhism that corresponds to our English word 'imagination', but instead there is a variety of different terms that cover the different meanings of our one word. The term *saññā*, 'perception' or 'apperception', appears to do at least some of the work of what Coleridge calls 'primary imagination', but it is not used in relation to the secondary or creative imagination. Crucially, the Buddha's teaching also introduces what appears to be an important qualification to Romantic enthusiasm about imagination. The Buddha did not unequivocally recommend the human power of imagination, but in his teaching about *papañca*, or 'proliferation', drew attention to a negative and distorting way in which our mind's power of (primary) imagination works. The teaching of *papañca* shows how the world that imagination creates usually depends upon underlying tendencies of greed, hate and delusion. Coleridge was a sublime proliferator: his notebooks are full of unrealised plans, and he spent years in unrequited longing for Sara Hutchinson. There is a compulsive quality to imagination as proliferation, which is creative in a negative, obscuring sense.

The process of *papañca* or proliferation starts from sense-impressions, as does all experience.²⁵ The coming together of the sense-object, the sense-organ and consciousness is contact. With contact as condition arises feeling, the hedonic response to experience as pleasant, unpleasant or neutral. What one feels, that one perceives. In the Coleridgean terms we have been using, this step in the process of perception involves primary imagination,

²⁵ The following is drawn from the Madhupiṇḍika Sutta (The Honeyball Discourse), *Majjhima-nikāya* 18.

but in the Buddha's teaching the emphasis is on the way in which our experience of objects in the world is coloured by a prior feeling-response, which then becomes part of an unconscious imaginative construction of reality. Then, what one perceives, one thinks about and proliferates about, and what one proliferates about comes back to determine one's world in relation to past, present and future. We could characterise proliferation in terms of *reactive imagination*, using 'reactive' in the sense of Sangharakshita's term 'reactive mind'.²⁶ Such a mind is simply reacting to sense-stimuli and from past conditioning, and such an imagination is not aware of the mind's power driving it. We should contrast proliferation with *creative imagination*, in the sense of a mind operating from awareness and no longer proliferating.²⁷

Instead of proliferating, we can cultivate mindful awareness, or *sati*, and I want to argue that this word is an important ingredient of how the early Buddhists discussed creative imagination. When we are established in awareness (*sati*) rather than proliferation (*papañca*), we experience what Subhuti calls 'primary reality', that is, perceptions (*saññā*) and feelings (*vedanā*), rather than the 'secondary reality' of our thoughts about, and reactions to, perceptions and feelings.²⁸ This 'primary reality' is the organized and meaningful world produced by what Coleridge calls the primary imagination. But this primary imagination is also responsible for the proliferation of perception which reinforces our delusions. Through the cultivation of mindful awareness, the proliferative tendency of the mind's power of imagination can be held in check.

The Pali word *sati* (in Sanskrit *smṛti*) is related to the verbal root *sar* (in Sanskrit *smṛ*) meaning 'to remember', but it is

²⁶ Discussed in the 1967 lecture 'Mind Reactive and Creative', reprinted in *Buddha Mind*, 2001; online at www.freebuddhistaudio.com.

²⁷ I expand this theme somewhat in my book *This Being, That Becomes*, pp.138–42.

²⁸ In his lecture 'Exploring the Honeyball Sutta' on www.freebuddhistaudio.com.

usually translated ‘mindfulness’ or ‘awareness’, though its meaning also extends to ‘recollection’.²⁹ But ‘awareness’ and ‘recollection’ are rather poor translations for some of the ways in which *sati* is used. In the Metta Sutta, for instance, it is said of *mettā* that *etaṃ satim adhiṭṭheyya*, ‘one should sustain this *sati*’, i.e. one should maintain a boundless heart of loving-kindness towards all beings. This ‘boundless heart of loving-kindness’ is not really a ‘recollection’ nor quite an ‘awareness’; it is more like an imaginative connection, and it is surely more correct to speak of *mettā-bhāvanā* in terms of creative imagination, of imagining other beings as like us wishing to be happy.

The Pali term for the practice known in English as ‘recollection of the Buddha’ is *buddhānussati*, that is, the *anussati* of the Buddha. The terms *anussati* and *paṭissati* are in Pali used interchangeably with *sati*.³⁰ What is meant by *sati* of the Buddha, however, is not really ‘recollection’, since it is not a matter of ‘remembering’ (unless one personally knew the Buddha); it is more a ‘calling to mind’ of the qualities of the Buddha. *Buddhānussati* is therefore an exercise of creative imagination, not so much a matter of thinking about the Buddha as exploring perception and feeling. Hence, let us experiment with taking *buddhānussati* as ‘imagining the Buddha’.³¹

Taking *sati* as implying creative imagination (in contrast to *papañca*, reactive imagination) allows us to gain new insight into certain passages in Pali that use the word *sati* in relation to the Buddha. We read, for instance, in the *Dhammapada*:

Those disciples of the Buddha always wake up happily

²⁹ The following discussion draws on the excellent scholarship of Kuan, 2008, pp.52–6.

³⁰ The prefixes *anu* and *paṭi* in this case seem only to add a directional or transitive sense to *sati*, implying some object of awareness.

³¹ I am not suggesting *sati* should always be translated as ‘imagination’, only that ‘imagination’ is sometimes an appropriate translation for *sati*, a word in Pali that does not have a single equivalent in English. However, while *sati* does not always mean ‘imagination’, it nearly always has the connotation of ‘awareness’, which is the usual way it is translated.

Whose imaginations day and night constantly play upon the Buddha
(*buddhagatā sati*).³²

We also read in the *Theragāthā* the verse of a monk named Sandhita, who was *paṭissato* about the Buddha. This might usually be translated as ‘mindful towards’, but let us experiment:

Underneath the sprouting green-leafed fig tree,
Imagining (*paṭissato*) the Buddha, I obtained a perception of him
alone.³³

In the next verse, Sandhita goes on to say that he obtained this perception thirty-three aeons (*kalpas*) ago, which is a bit strange, but also that having done so he gained the destruction of the *āsavas*, which is tantamount to awakening; so it would seem that imagining the Buddha led Sandhita to awakening.

And finally there is Piṅgiya, the brahman convert to the Buddha’s teaching, who explained to his former teacher, Bāvari, about his imaginative relationship to the Buddha:

I see him with my mind as if with my eye,
being mindful (*appamatto*) day and night, brahman.
I spend the night revering him,
and because of that I think there is no being apart.
My faith, rapture, thought and imagination (*sati*)
do not depart from the message of Gotama.
In whatever direction the greatly wise one goes,
in just that direction I am bowed down.
I am aged and of failing strength,
and so my body cannot go where he is.
I am constantly on mental pilgrimage,
For my mind is joined to him, brahman.³⁴

³² *Dhammapada* v.296; my translation; cf. vv.297–9.

³³ *Theragāthā* v.217; my translation.

³⁴ *Sutta-nipāta* vv.1142–4; my translation, based on K.R. Norman, 2001. ‘On mental pilgrimage’ renders *saṃkappayattāya vajāmi*, literally ‘I go (*vajāmi*) on a pilgrimage (*yatta* = Sanskrit *yatra*) of intention (*sankappa*).’

Piṅgiya makes the connection between the quality of mindfulness (here *appamāda*) and imagination more or less explicit, saying that ‘being mindful’ (*appamatta*) he sees the Buddha with his mind as if with his eye. Piṅgiya’s *sati* or ‘creative imagination’ is a faculty linked here with his faith (*saddhā*), rapture (*pīṭi*) and thought (*manas*), and hence illuminating what is involved in the successful imagination of the Buddha.

Imagination in the creative sense is a kind of inner seeing as much for the early Buddhists such as Piṅgiya as for Coleridge and Wordsworth; we might say that, when those early followers of the Buddha imagined the Buddha, they found him in:

such visitings
Of awful promise, when the light of sense
Goes out in flashes...

– that is, the early Buddhists perhaps imagined the Buddha in the same way as Wordsworth found the greatness that lives in the invisible world. However, it is important not to suppose that creative imagination is necessarily visionary or dramatic. The power of imagination can operate via any of our senses, and the Buddha might manifest in the form of a ‘still, small voice’ as much as in a blinding flash. To illustrate, I would like to draw attention to Sangharakshita’s recounting in his memoirs of his imagining the Buddha. Sangharakshita describes how he engaged in dialogue with the Buddha during concentrated meditation while in Bombay in February 1956:

Sometimes these feelings [of intense love towards the Buddha] were accompanied by the corresponding visionary experiences, but more often there would be an awareness of the transcendental ‘person’ in question without my being conscious of any particular form. On several occasions this awareness was so strong that I was able to put questions and receive answers. Not that I heard any words, whether my own or the Buddha’s. I pronounced the words of my questions

sub-vocally, and those of the Buddha's answers were imprinted directly on my consciousness without being pronounced at all.³⁵

Sangharakshita's experience perhaps gives us some sense of what early Buddhists like Sandhita and Pīṅgiya were doing when they were imagining the Buddha, and how doing so was part of their spiritual life.

As Coleridge tried to explain, the creative imagination at its best brings forth symbols that unify reality into a living image – such as Wordsworth's 'illuminated image' of Snowdon in moonlight. Those early Buddhists who imagined the Buddha did so by giving birth to a symbol within themselves: this Buddha was both an embodied human being whom they called to mind, and was at the same time the living truth. This perhaps is the meaning of the Buddha's words to Vakkali, who had longed to see the Buddha in person before he died:

Enough, Vakkali, of your wanting to see my putrid body! Vakkali, who sees the Dharma sees me; who sees me sees the Dharma. Seeing the Dharma, Vakkali, you see me, and seeing me you see the Dharma.³⁶

This shift from the Buddha's body to the Dharma is a leap of imagination (i.e. of *sati*) – and it was from this leap that the rich visionary worlds of later Buddhism began to evolve, and still continue to 'feed upon infinity', to find new forms, and thereby 'not depart from the message of Gotama.'

³⁵ *In the Sign of the Golden Wheel*, p.286.

³⁶ From the Vakkali Sutta, *Samyutta-nikāya* 22:87; my translation.

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