

Complexes and Imagination

For me, active imagining means to concentrate on fantasies and to let them flow and to observe what happens.

In my imagination I “see” a bird – I follow this bird. It leads me in a certain landscape that I can describe. The bird and the landscape trigger a specific emotion – I might meet someone in this landscape, or I am just there following the flying of the bird...

Jung himself conceived the notion of “Active Imagination” in a broad sense, much broader than it is understood nowadays, namely: a dialectical Auseinandersetzung between Consciousness and the Unconscious.

Jung's notion of “Active Imagination” covers first of all the shaping of the symbol: seen as visualisation of a symbol. Or, even more, illustrating it in paintings, drawings or in sculpture.

To present an inner situation in dancing has also been seen as “Active Imagination” by Jung. It is important to me to keep this broad idea about active imagination by Jung in mind, even if over time, only the development of the image in fantasy in a waking situation and the active dialectical interaction with it has been called “Active Imagination”.

Jung mentioned the idea of active imagination 1916 for the first time in his essay "The transcendent function" (CW 8, § 131 -193). In this essay he describes the formation of symbols. He does not use the expression "Active Imagination", but deals with the question of how human beings are able to concentrate on their phantasies and to shape it. Especially important for him was to eliminate critical attentiveness. These inner images or inner words have to be expected, perceived, and expressed in words or paintings, even sculptured with the whole body: this was his primary accent.

Jung spoke about "Active Imagination" in more detail in the Introduction to Richard Wilhelm's "The Secret of the Golden Flower". (GW 13, §18, 19, 20, 24) In those remarks he spoke in first place about the psychic faculty of letting the flow of the inner images happen unhindered as a prerequisite for dealing with fantasies. The psychic faculty of letting happen is comparable to the flow of inner images. This is not easy because anxieties might block the flow of the images. The inner critical voice, so Jung, has to be eliminated. I think the critical voice can also be portrayed in visualisation and dealt with.

In a 1947 letter Jung describes in a brief way what he understands by "Active Imagination": "The point is that you start with any image....Contemplate it and carefully observe how the picture begins to unfold or to change. Don't try to make it into something, just do nothing but observe what its spontaneous changes are. Any mental picture you contemplate in this way will sooner or later change through a spontaneous association that causes a slight alteration of the picture. You must carefully avoid impatient jumping from one subject to another. Hold fast to the one image you have chosen and wait until it changes by itself. Note all these changes and eventually step into the picture yourself and, if it is a speaking figure at all, then say what you have to say to that figure and listen to what he, she [or it] has to say. Thus you can not only analyse

your unconscious but you also give your unconscious a chance to analyse yourself, and therewith you gradually create the unity of conscious and unconscious without which there is no individuation at all." (Letter to Mr. O. 2.May 1947, Letters Vol. II, p. 76)

In this description of "Active Imagination" it is clearly expressed that the observation of the inner image is important, but also the dialogue with inner figures, if possible. We can also see that the model of symbol formation, as Jung described it, can be experienced in doing "Active Imagination": The unconscious can be perceived, must be observed and accepted and, in dialoguing with the waking Ego- Consciousness – in reflection – both the Conscious mind and the Unconscious can become altered, expressed in changing symbols or in new formations of symbols. These symbols are signposts in the process of individuation, this process of maturation and transformation in which, through the dialogue between the unconscious and consciousness, a human being is on the way to become who he or she really is but never was. The technique of the individuation process and the technique of the "Active Imagination" – finally – are the same in accordance with C.G. Jung's understanding of symbol formation.

About imagination C.G. Jung gave us this very important definition: "Imagination is the reproductive or creative activity of the mind in general. It is not a special faculty, since it can come into play in all the basic forms of psychic activity...Fantasy as imaginative activity is...simply the direct expression of psychic life or psychic energy which cannot appear in consciousness except in the form of images or contents..." (CW 6, § 722)

Jung and the complexes

There is coherence between the Jung's understanding of complexes and our imaginations: "The complex forms...a miniature self-contained psyche which develops a

peculiar fantasy-life of its own. What we call fantasy is simply spontaneous psychic activity...In sleep the fantasy takes the form of dreams. But in waking life too we continue to dream beneath the threshold of consciousness under the influence of repressed or other unconscious complexes." CW 16, § 125

Already in 1916 Jung pointed to the emotionally charged contents as starting points for imagination (fantasies, series of images), as a starting point for the formation of symbols. Complexes are seen as centres of energy, grouping them around a strong intrinsic emotional core and called forth whenever the individual has a painful encounter with an outer demand or an event in their environment which overwhelms them. Each experience with a similar topic or a similar emotion is identified and understood; we react in the structure of the complex and therefor reinforce the complex. (CW 3, 77-196)

Complexes show the vulnerable parts in the psyche, but as energy centres they have a certain activity – expressed in the inherent emotion of the complex – that creates psychic life.

Complexes hinder the individual in developing in the area of the main complexes, but in the complexes there are also germs of new life possibilities. (CW 8, §63) These creative germs can be found if we accept the complexes and if we let show it in fantasies.

Complexes are life problems but also express the central themes of our life. They are what determine our psychic disposition. Symbols and symbolic portrayals connected with corresponding emotions are both: expressions of complexes and the places where complexes are worked on. (Verarbeitungsstätte) "Complexes are the actors of our dreams." (CW8, § 202)

Clinical vignette

It is possible to concentrate on a predominant emotion and wait for an image that portrays the psychic situation that has triggered the relevant emotion.

A 26 year old man says he is full of rage. He cannot see an outer reason for it, but he feels he could batter the world to pieces.

I ask him to concentrate on his rage, mentioning that perhaps an inner image could arise out of this concentration.

“I am in a house, perhaps it is more a hut, and from all sides people are approaching and attacking the hut: I defend myself – but it is for nothing, too many attackers. It is like in a criminal story. I put a commode before the door, so they enter through the windows. I throw them back, but I run out of energy. And now I am stricken with fear: What are they going to do with me?”

We have not only a huge rage, the man with his rage now has a picture (im Bild sein) for his situation explaining why he is so angry. He feels threatened from all sides, suffers from a deep anxiety that he defends in a heroic way by his rage. The imagination did help him to understand his anxiety: before he was convinced of almost never being frightened. Sure, the different housebreakers have to be identified in their meaning, What has to invade has usually been locked out for too long a time, and want to be a part of his life in his hut. Rage and anxiety can be seen in correspondence with a complex- episode.

The complex- episode as experience of relationship

Complexes are called forth whenever the individual has a painful encounter with an outer demand or an event in their environment which overwhelms them; they are the

expression of difficult experiences in relationship, especially in early childhood. These experiences get constellated in everyday life because, in relationships, you experience similar difficulties or, with a stronger complex, you have the tendency to understand experiences quite often in the sense of the constellated complex – and this happens in the analytical relationship as well. In everyday life these experiences are disturbing ("I experience the same rejection all the time; the world threatens me"). In the therapeutic relationship we welcome the constellation of the complex- episode: an important problem in relationships is showing up, can be worked on and eventually changed.

Complex- episodes are stories of difficult dysfunctional relationship episodes that repeatedly occur in similar ways, consisting of comparable information, in particular about the self-image (Selbstbild) of the child and of the attacking persons, connected with definite emotions experienced in these difficult relationship situations. They concern relationship experiences that have occurred repeatedly and they are internalised with episodic memory. (Kast, 2003) That means that the whole complex- episode (child and aggressor) – usually we can tell a story about it – is internalised and can be active. Even though there is often an identification with the child part of the complex- episode and the human being with the complex is convinced that "all" other people attack them in the way the attacking figures of the complex - episodes did, this might be not true. We can also be identified with the attacker – in soliloquies – but also in how we treat other people.

Again: Active imagination

In a 1950 letter Jung spoke in a very clear way about this technique (July 13, 1950, Letters I, p. 561): "You must step into the fantasy yourself and compel the figures to give

you an answer. Only in this way is the unconscious integrated with consciousness by means of a dialectical procedure, a dialogue between yourself and the unconscious figures. Whatever happens in the fantasy must happen to *you*. You should not let you be represented by a fantasy figure. You must safeguard the ego and only let it be modified by the unconscious, just as the latter must be acknowledged with full justification and only prevented from suppressing and assimilating the ego.”

Jung's insistence on the need to draw a distinction between the Ego and the unconscious figures may have a connection with his own experiences in “Active Imagination”. It seems that he easily identified with these inner figures and he experienced it as a problem. He described an important development in his processes of imagination in the “Red Book”:

“Probably the most part of what I have written in the earlier part of this book was given to me by ΦΙΛΗΜΩΝ. Consequently I was as if intoxicated. But now I noticed that ΦΙΛΗΜΩΝ assumed a form distinct from me.”

This remark concerns the differentiation of the Ego of Jung and the figure of the old wise man as an inner figure. Not Jung himself is wise in those imaginations, but he has access to the figure of the old wise man. The concern to identify too much with these inner figures – and in consequence to give too much power to the ego complex that does not belong to it – meaning that in such circumstances the ego is losing firm ground under its feet – can be found in all the remarks on the subject of “Active Imagination” by Jung.

Nevertheless: as important the differentiation between the ego and the unconscious might be, a process can be observed: emotionally charged and foreign figures in the

imagination are experienced first in dissociation, afterwards in identification and little by little a relationship is established that becomes very important.

Consciously it was a major concern of Jung to get into contact with dissociated parts of the psyche by the technique of “Active Imagination”. The numerous imaginations of Jung himself portrayed in the Red Book are basically attempts to embed numerous inner figures in the imagination and to give to their energy, their emotionality, and their topics access to consciousness. That means – and Jung has provided evidence for it by his experiences – that dissociations and split off complexes can be connected in a symbolic way, especially through imagination, to consciousness. Seen more fundamentally: Human brokenness (Zerrissenheit) can be cured through work with symbols. In my view this is of great significance for Jungian psychology nowadays. The prerequisite for suspending dissociations is to notify and give up identification with the split off parts and to get into relationship with them.

Practical: From the complex- episode to the “Active Imagination”

Inner dialogues do not necessarily qualify as being “Active Imagination”; more often they are the expression of complex- episodes, very similar to fruitless soliloquies. If these kinds of imaginations are repeated and repeated, mostly without any change because too much anxiety hinders the flow of images, new symbols and new possibilities of behaviour are not found. On the contrary, the dissociations are maintained and old patterns of behaviour are perpetuated and become cemented. It can also be observed that, in compensation to the original complex - episode, imaginations with somewhat comforting inner figures are realized. This might be appeasing and important for some time – but if nothing changes, it is also a standstill.

A clinical vignette

A woman married shortly before her final examinations and did not pass them. Very soon she became a mother and a housewife. Now, at 46, she is asking for therapy and asks herself what could be the purpose of her life.

She told me again what she had told me repeatedly:

“Something in me says again and again that I did everything totally wrong in my life: I married the wrong man in the wrong moment of my life and I chose the wrong style of life...”

I asked her to picture this “something in me” more clearly. Her imagination was: “I see a judge in a black robe with a bald head (as my grandfather had), with glasses similar to those an uncle of mine has, with a keen face like sadistic people always have. He is taller than I am and he is standing above me (Erhebung). I am completely at his mercy. He tells me those well-known sentences. I feel shame; I could cringe for shame (vor Scham winden). I should have seen all this by myself. I excuse myself and I want to correct myself.” I interrupt her with the remark: “This does not work.” I ask her to go deeper with images of relaxation. She does it and feels slightly better. The judge as an inner figure composed of different aspects of the authorities she experienced in her life renders his judgment – and the analysand is full of shame and wants to correct everything. Her intention will have no success; this is why I intervened saying her wish is illusionary. It is not clear to her which concrete situation she wanted to change or in what direction. She had a generalized will for improvement and correction but, being totally abstract, it was of no help. For correction concrete little steps are required.

Talking with her after her imagination we try to find out if things are so like the judge pretends they are; we find that he uses words like “always” and “everything wrong.” We could be sceptical about it because always is never and to do everything wrong is really difficult. Also the questions as to why this judge assumes the right to evaluate her life is discussed, and also the question about her arguments for the life she has conducted – then without arguments for it, she would have changed it years ago. We clarify why she gives such importance to this judge, even placing him above her and why she sees herself next to him as unimportant. It is evident, as is mostly the case in connection with complex- episodes, that the attacking figures are summarizations of some people, in this case persons she experienced as judging and shaming her.

After this reflexion I propose trying another imagination, one in which she tries to be more active. I propose addressing the discontent. Being so reproachful refers to discontent; to address this can help much more than identifying with the victim and experiencing shame.

The Analysand (A) to the Judge (J)

A: You are discontent with me.

J: You are doing everything in a wrong way: Always, wrong decisions, wrong choices, you are always wrong.

(Explanation: In the imagination the judge uses the familiar “Du” – and not “Sie” [for you])

A: Why do you not use Sie?

J. I always did, you can say Du to me also.

A: No, I do not want to; I want you to say Sie.

J: As you prefer – that does not change anything about the fact that you are a loser.

A: Does this disturb you that much?

J: Eminently. I had such great expectations in you. Sure, you are only a woman, but something would have been possible nevertheless considering your intelligence. And then: it is immense laziness.

A: It was not laziness, it was passion.

J: It was laziness, anxieties and perhaps some passion. You could live in a passionate way and doing examinations at the same time.

A: This I can see nowadays too

J: And what is the excuse today?

A: Always anxiety, not primarily laziness. I am never up to your expectations.

J: This you will learn to stand.

The dialogue continued in this way for weeks. The inner judge got more precise, more comprehensive. He addresses some aspects the analysand can change, if she wants to. It becomes for her more and more clear that she does not want to obey the judge in a lot of points and that she can take responsibility for those decisions. In the mirror of the judge she becomes conscious that she demeans women, herself included. She is shocked.

Finally a separation from the destructive authority complex became possible. In working in an active way with this complex she got more and more the feeling of no longer being his victim – even when from time to time she felt helpless. The judge of the complex became less destructive, and that meant the analysand lost more and more her self-destructivity.

Very close to the conscious level the analysand elaborated in a dialogue in imagination an important complex- episode. The analysand gained new insights; the judge changed as well. In her inner picture: He had friendlier features; his face became more filled out and in his speech he admitted from time to time that he had no definite opinion in some situations. The conflict about “Du” and “Sie” faded away when the analysand began talking about existentially important experiences. Nevertheless it was possible to dismiss the “Du”; she created an initial distance to this inner figure and she revolted for the first time consciously in an imagination.

Even this “Active Imagination”, so close to consciousness and to everyday speech, enables us to enter into a dialogue with the unconscious, in a dialogue through which consciousness and the unconscious can change. This dialogue replaced the earlier sadomasochistic relationship that showed itself in this example of the judge deciding about the ego of the woman. The unconscious can only be that overwhelming if the ego has nothing to oppose it with; if the ego is structured so low that it can’t be active.

At this place we meet the boundaries of the “Active Imagination” method that follows the principle of the creative process: This method requires a well-structured ego as a dialogue partner to the unconscious. We can’t expect a well-structured ego in every person in every life situation. This is the reason why I developed ways concerning how

different kinds of imagination can also be used, especially about how the analyst can reinforce the analysand's ego function in the imaginative process. Through a learning process, the analysand can take over helpful ideas of the analyst, become more courageous in the imaginations, and enabled to dialogue with inner figures. The structure of the ego can improve – and imaginations become possible without the analyst's guidance. This helps separate the ego complex from parental complexes – from parental complex- episodes – and helps to distinguish between Ego – and Non Ego. It might sound paradoxical: the analyst provides his ego function in an association and this helps the analysand get a better ego-structure and, with that, the ability to work with active imagination.

“Active Imagination” – a clinical example

In general “Active Imagination” deals with emotionally important images from dreams, or with strong emotions on which a disturbing affect is concentrated. The intention is to know more, what problems, what possibilities of development are hiding behind an emotional problem.

But instructions can also help, especially in rather anxious persons.

A possible instruction for an imagination:

Choose a landscape with water in it. Someone approaches you. Observe this figure – and if you like, get in touch with this figure.

Does this figure have something to tell you? Does it show something in the way she or he behaves and/or performs – or in saying something to you?

React the same way you would react in a normal encounter – and see what happens.

Clinical vignette

A 35 year old woman has come into analysis because she felt quite anxious in different situations and discouraged. She often worked with imaginations. Among her complex-episodes one important is quite similar to that of the woman with the inner judge, but it is not that destructive.

In a therapeutic hour, approximately one year after the beginning of analysis, she complained she felt so uneasy without finding a reason for it. I gave her the above instruction and asked her to concentrate on her unease.

Her imagination:

I see a wellspring, I am in a hilly landscape in the alpine upland, and there are trees. Here a well is springing up, it is a natural wellspring. Beside the spring there is a big stone and an old man is sitting on it, a very old man with a large white beard. He has a very grave facial expression. He looks at me, serious and inquiring.

I get near to him and I find that I feel ashamed. I want to find out why I feel ashamed. I don't get a real hint, lots of nonsense comes to my mind. The old man looks in an inquiring way and always, if someone looks at me in an inquiring way, I feel ashamed. I slowly get nearer to him and sit down on the other side of the spring. He continues to look at me in an inquiring way. I say: If you look at me in this way, I get a guilty conscience and think I have done something wrong.

The old man nods. He mumbles: "This is correct. Something is always going wrong. You have to be like the water from the spring: constantly flowing, constantly flowing". I seize

on the idea what I could have done wrong. The old man continues to mumble:

“Constantly flowing, constantly flowing, ...”

I stop to think about doing wrong, I relax, I see the spring consciously, and I feel the quiet atmosphere. I look to the old man. He is visibly concentrated on the flowing water.

Suddenly I see another man next to the spring: a much younger man, such an arrogant guy in dark clothing with a sleeveless jacket or vest. He looks at me in an ironic way.

I fall into a rage.

He says: “Yes, yes, always letting flow, letting everything flow, just go on like that, letting life pass, sitting at the spring, sitting until doomsday – just letting flow, no responsibility for anything. He says that with a tremendously scornful expression on his face.

From where do you get the nerve to throw dirt at my experience of the spring?

I have not thrown dirt into the spring.

But you have mocked me.

If mockery touches you, it is your problem.

I feel that he is right, but I have to keep him quiet. I am so angry but I have no idea how I could make him be quiet. I want to shake him but he is much taller and stronger than I am. If I am angry, only violence comes to my mind; but he is stronger than I am, I can't make him shut up. I also don't have a stone to throw at him.

He again looks at me scornfully.

I look to the old man seeking help: he is supposed to help me. But he is just looking in great concentration into the water of the spring, at the point, where the water leaves the earth.

I decide to do the same. I feel the anger fading away, I force myself to not look at this scornful fellow. I concentrate on the flowing water.

After a long time has passed I look up into the composed face of the old man. The arrogant lad has gone.

I go away knowing the old man will look after the well – I can come back whenever I want. I am happy, I run into the city.”

During and after the imagination the analysand is very much impressed by this old man, by his ability to concentrate and his presence. She was happy that she succeeded in concentrating on the flowing water, on the essential, as she said.

For her, this image also became a deterrent in everyday life: If she felt ashamed, because she did something wrong (or she assumed she had done something wrong), she could evoke this image and meditate it and gained distance to the shameful feelings.

In the imagination there was not only this important, intense, and quiet image; she was disturbed by the arrogant man. He embodied a part of her that would be willing to be more active, to take more responsibility. But in the imagination he acted only in a critical way; his arguments could be important; the woman is not at an age to draw back from the world. But he made fun of experiences that were important to her: in the sense of a complex- episode he turned against the analysand in an arrogant way. She wanted to deal with him: Violence was not a good way – the good way was the concentration on

the water rising from the earth. This symbol of flowing energy from the dark of the earth up to the light helped her to feel herself, her centre. It was the old man, who showed her what to do. The image touched feelings of the beginning, the idea that the water of the spring was not exhaustible. It evoked a trust in her that life is flowing, things are passing and new possibilities are coming.

Out of this experience, she was able to work on the complex- episode of the arrogant man, especially her being identified with him, shaming other people, being arrogant herself.

At the end of the imagination she ran to the city, for her a place to work, to be with other people.

Concluding remarks

“Active Imagination” is very often defined by Jung as a method for helping deal with irritating affects; emotions should become more and more a definite conceivability that can be formed and can be reflected about and understood. ¹ (CW 8, § 167)

The technique of imagination is also of great importance for working with dream images: Through processing with imagination, the final aspect of the symbols and the symbolic processes, the aspect of expectation for new ideas is emphasized. And this is true in general for the imagination: the material, especially when rendered into visible form, shows emerging processes, pointing to future development or picturing its hindrances.

If imagination is a kind of meditation and used in a regular way, we offer our psyche the possibility to unfold; abysses can be seen, we find out where we are really in danger,

¹ Jung CG, CW 8, § 167

where our Ego is in danger, but also which inner figures are helpful and fascinating. And sometimes, we are just working on a complex- episode. Active imagination gives us the impression that the inner world can be formed and changed.

In several places Jung has identified Active Imagination as a method at the end of the analysis, as the possibility for the analysand to become less dependent on the analyst: It is not the analyst who is analysing the unconscious any longer, it is the analysand doing it with active imagination.

That Jung brought this method into connection with the ending of an analysis might be one reason why it is considered to be that difficult. Jung and some of his followers (von Franz) asked analysands to do “Active Imagination” at home, to write it down and to bring the notes to the analytical hour. The analyst read the notes – and did not give any comment so as to not disturb the process. This practice can be helpful at a very advanced stage – and it is used without the analyst by analysands. I myself think it is a good idea to practice imagination and also “Active Imagination” in the analytical setting. If necessary, the analyst can take over the role of the ego – as a model or more often helps to reflect about a difficult situation in the imagination. Written “Active imaginations” lose a lot of their liveliness. “Active Imagination” within the analytic process can be experienced as an impressive and creative process that develops between the two and that can give the analytical relationship a certain depth, since through working on images, images in the own psyche become vitalized in both of them.

“Active Imagination” needs practice in imagination in a general way. Through practice it does not lose its aspect of freedom and autonomy. In contrary: having been trained to develop the inner pictures as vividly as possible with all the modalities of our senses,

having developed strategies in dealing with delicate situations, we are able to let these inner images unfold in a quiet way, and we do not have to control or to correct it prematurely. We can trust that we will not be carried away by these imaginative processes but that we can work on them and with them.

Also the character of numinosity that some of these “Active Imaginations” can have does not get diminished by the training in imagination: In imagination, even in very early stages, we can find contents connecting us with the depths of our soul. But very often in imaginations we deal with everyday problems, with complex- episodes. We have to assimilate those contents that the process provides at the time they arise. They are the currently accessible resources. Active Imagination is an important form of self-care that leads to being truly alive.

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