
Mundus Imaginalis

Module 4: Associations

Course created by Tasha Tollman & Anja van Kralingen



Approaching the Images

The world of imagination is coloured with pictures, images, events, places and people. This rich world of fantasy presents to us senses in which we are the masters of our own destiny, the captain of our ship, and allows us to experience grand adventures, adoring audiences and passionate embraces. Here Jung warns us:

*“As a rule there is a marked tendency simply to enjoy this interior entertainment and to leave it at that. Then, of course, there is no real progress but only endless variations on the same theme, which is not the point of the exercise at all.” (CW 15 *Mysterium Coniunctionis*, par 706)*

Active Imagination differs from passive fantasy through the act of bringing consciousness to the process. All the images arising in the active imagination hold important information for you, but without conscious participation these images are simply a passive fantasy. It is consciousness—the ego—then, that approaches the images that have arisen, seeking to understand the meaning behind the symbolic content and in this way discovering the personal meanings that the images hold for you.

At this stage of the process, consciousness, the ego, takes the lead, and we turn our attention towards finding our personal associations with the images, events and people that we encountered in the active imagination.

Identifying the Images

An active imagination may contain people, animals, places, objects, symbols, colours, sounds and dialogue and each of these is an image that holds important information and meaning from the unconscious.

To uncover the meaning contained in the active imagination, we need to unpack it, examining each image on its own to discover what the unconscious is trying to convey. What the hidden meaning and messages for your life may be. The first step then is to identify all the images. Begin by dividing a piece of paper into two columns. In the left column identify and write down each image.

Let's take a look at an active imagination and work through this process together:

Active Imagination

I am a black swan swimming on a lake. I look down into the lake seeing my own reflection. As I look up, I see a group of black swans. One of the swans swims towards me and our necks arch so that our heads touch forming a heart shape. After a few moments we lift our heads and swim towards the group of swans. I expect to join them but instead, we swim ahead of them and they follow. Suddenly the scene shifts and I am a woman standing on the banks of the lake watching the swans swim towards me. I am dressed in a long white robe. Behind me, slightly to the left, is a man also dressed in a long robe and behind him a group of people. I think of them as villagers. They are all watching the scene unfold. The two black swans swim to the edge of the lake and I go forward to greet them, realising that I am a Druid priestess being initiated. I place my hand on the heads of the two swans. As I move my hands away, I catch a glimpse of a symbol on the palms of my hands and turn my palms towards the sky. A shaft of light from the symbol on my hands shoots into the sky—a continuous pillar of light—and my initiation is complete. I am now a Druid priestess. This is the end of the active imagination.

Before looking for your personal associations, expand on the active imagination and think about:

- Where was the active imagination set? Do you know this place or does it remind you of any place that you know? What does it remind you of? What does it make you think of? How does it make you feel?
- Do you know the people in your dream, or do they remind you of anyone you know? What is your relationship to this person? How would you describe this person?
- What did you see? What does it remind you of? What does it make you think of?
- How do you feel in the dream? When have you felt like this before? What does it remind you of?
- What were you thinking?
- What feeling do you have about this image? What words or ideas come to mind when you look at it?

- What is the overall mood of the active imagination?
- Is there a conflict or paradox?
- Is the conflict or paradox resolved? And if so, how?

Once you have explored the active imagination scene and setting, start to focus on the individual symbols and images:

In this active imagination we would list the following images:

Black swan	
Lake	
Bank	
Sky	
Druid priestess	
white robe	
male figure	
villages	
palms of hands	
symbol on hands	
pillar of light	
initiation	

Associations

Once we have written down the main images in the left-hand column, we can move our attention to the right column and next to each image we begin by finding the associations to the image.

What is an association? An association is any word, idea, mental picture, feeling or memory that pops into your mind when you look at the image in the active imagination.

It is anything that you spontaneously connect with the image. Usually, every image will have several associations.

Associations can be either subjective, objective or archetypal.

Subjective associations refer to your feelings, thoughts, memories, beliefs and opinions about the image. For example, let's take an image from the active imagination we are looking at—let's say the swan. Your subjective associations may be that a swan is graceful and beautiful or that it is territorial and aggressive.

Objective associations refer to what the thing is, in and of itself. Returning to the image of swan, an objective association is that swans are comfortable in three different elements. They are able to swim in water, fly in the sky and walk on land making them equally comfortable in all three elements. They mate for life and so on.

Archetypal associations refer to a universal pattern or motif. And here we turn to stories, legends and myth to find our associations. Finding the archetypal associations is referred to as amplification but more about that in the next module.

We begin finding associations from our personal—that is—our subjective associations.

Why begin with personal associations? Here Jung tells us:

“Two different individuals may have almost exactly the same dream. Yet if, for instance, one dreamer is young and the other is old, the problem that disturbs them is correspondingly different and it would be obviously absurd to interpret both in the same way. An example that comes to my mind is a dream in which a group of young men are riding on horseback across a wide field. The dreamer is in the lead and he jumps a ditch full of water, just clearing the hazard. The rest of the party fall into the ditch. Now the young man who first told me this dream was a cautious, introverted type. But I also heard the same dream from an old man of daring character, who had lived an active and enterprising life. At the time he had this dream, he was an invalid who gave his doctor and nurse a great deal of trouble; he had actually injured himself by his disobedience of medical instructions. It was clear to me that this dream was telling the young man what he ought to do. But it was telling the old man what he actually was doing. While it

encouraged the hesitant young man, the old man was in no such need of encouragement; the spirit of enterprise that still flickered within him was, indeed, his greatest trouble. This example shows how the interpretation of dreams and symbols largely depends upon the individual circumstances of the dreamer and the condition of his mind.” (Man and His Symbols, p. 56)

To find your personal associations, look at the image in the left-hand column, ask yourself, “what words or ideas come to mind about this image? What feelings do I have about this image?” Write down each association that comes directly from the image. Write down as many associations as possible. At this stage of the process, keep in mind that the image has everything it needs, so allow the meaning to emerge.

At this stage of associations, make sure that you are making direct associations.

A direct association is when you look at the image—let’s take stomach as an example. Your direct association with a stomach could be that it is something that digests, consumes, hungers, needs to be fed.

Chain associations are when we make connections with the associations rather than the original image. In other words, you make your first association, then make another association to that association and then another association to that one. For example, if we look at the image – stomach – a chain association could look something like hunger. I was always hungry as a child. We were so poor that we had nothing to eat. I felt lonely, abandoned, not cared for, unwanted.

You can see that the chain association leads you further and further away from the original image. Here Jung warns us:

“One of the lesser dangers is that the procedure may not lead to any positive result, since it easily passes over into the so called ‘free association’ of Freud, where the patient gets caught in the sterile circle of his own complexes, from which he is in any case unable to escape.” (CW 8, p. 70)

Another danger to be avoided is turning to dream dictionaries or to google dream symbols. Your psyche is using images that hold a specific meaning for you. Here Jung reminds us:

“No dream symbol can be separated from the individual who dreams it... Each individual varies so much in the way that his unconscious complements or compensates his conscious mind that it is impossible to be sure how far dreams and their symbols can be classified at all.” (Man and His Symbols, p. 53)

That is why this step is so important. It is vital that you discover and learn the language of your unconscious and the meaning it is conveying for you, in your own unique library of symbols. From time to time if you find yourself drawing a complete blank on associations, then turn to the objective association to the symbol. From my experience, the objective association brings with it new insights, ideas and imagery. When working with objective associations, you can use questions such as:

- What is its definition?
- What is it used for?
- What is its function. What does it do or what is it used for?
- What are its qualities or characteristics or behaviours or instincts?

Application

Identify the images and find the associations for the active imagination you conducted last week.

RECOMMENDED READING

Inner Work Using Dreams and Active Imagination for Personal Growth, by Robert A. Johnson

Man and His Symbols, conceived and edited by Carl Jung