

Imagination and the Spiritual Path

Richard Blum

I've been a daydreamer for most of my life; it has been both a curse and a blessing. It was also one of the reasons why I was initially drawn to Meher Baba. Because he indicated that the spiritual path was traveled through imagination, and since I was good at imagining, I figured that Baba could both cure my daydreaming habit and guide me on the spiritual path. Well, forty years later, I can't say much about the path, but at least my daydreaming has subsided a bit.

But it has left me wondering: exactly what role does imagination play on the spiritual path? Baba states, "The progress through the six planes is progress in imagination." (*Discourses*, p.29) But by that does he mean that my imagination and the imagination of the spiritual path are one and the same?

To examine that question, I'll recount the one major "spiritual experience" I've had because it sheds some light on why I examine the role of imagination in spiritual experience.

My experience occurred inside Baba's bedroom in the early 70's during my first visit to the Meher Center in Myrtle Beach. I was very drawn to Baba and came to the Center to learn more about him. It turned out to be my first encounter with Baba's omnipresence.

As a college student at that time, I was in the habit of staying up until 4:00 in the morning and sleeping until noon. When the standard announcement was made that Baba's house would be open at 11:00 the next morning I thought, "Do I really want to get up early just to see some sandals and clothing that Meher Baba had worn?" The answer was "No!" I was definitely not into clothing, so I intended to sleep in. But as fate would have it, I was woken at 9:30 by the three other guys in my cabin, and I figured I'd might never come back to the place, so I might as well get up early and go over and see his house.

I don't remember a tour of Baba's house, or anything like that. All I remember is standing silently in Baba's bedroom. It was there that I internally spoke to Baba for the first time. I don't know what prompted me to do so; it just happened.

The first thing I said to Baba internally was, "If you're anywhere, you're here in this room right now." Again, I don't know what prompted me to say this, but I assume I was feeling some special presence, and in a sense I was saying, "Baba if you're real, if you exist, then you exist here in your bedroom."

The second thing I said was, “I need to learn to love you the way a woman loves a man.” Again, I don’t know what prompted me to say that, other than at that time in my life I thought, “Baba said we had to love him, and as he was a guy, and I was guy, and guys don’t love guys, so I can’t love him in that way. Anyway, it’s women who really know how to love, and guys don’t, so I should learn to love him the way a woman loves a man.”

And the last thing I said to Baba was, “Now I’m going to make my mind silent.” I had been reading Baba’s discourses before coming to the Center, including the section on meditation. And based upon Baba’s descriptions, I had begun practicing meditation. I had a knack for making my mind quiet. So I stopped thinking, and stood in the silence. Immediately, a strong reverberation began thundering in the room. It was a loud, audible vibration coming out of the walls of Baba's bedroom. I just stood there, completely absorbed in it. It seemed perfectly natural. I remained absorbed in the sound for several minutes. Then I left, went outside, sat on the steps, and proceeded to put on my shoes.

Attempting to stay absorbed in the experience, I didn’t pay attention to anyone else, until someone sat down next to me and asked, “Did you hear that?” I didn’t want to leave the experience, so I arrogantly didn’t even bother to look at the person. I just nonchalantly answered, “Yeah, I heard it.” The other person said, “It sounded like a jet plane flew through the room.” Again, I didn’t even look at the person, but just responded, “That’s right, it sounded like a jet plane,” even though to me the sound was clearly not that of a plane. But I understood that what he meant was that the sound and vibration was as powerful as a jet. Then I just stood up and walked away.

Now, years later, when I look back on that experience, I realize that if someone else had not vouched for the authenticity of that shared incident with me, I would be uncertain if my encounter was genuine or just the result of my imagination.

But is there really a difference between spiritual experience and imagination? Is not spiritual experience comprised of imagination? When describing the spiritual path, Baba stated:

On the spiritual path there are six stations, the seventh station being the terminus, or the goal. Each intermediate station is, in its own way, a kind of imaginative anticipation of the goal. (*Discourses*, p.129)

When Baba speaks of imagination, does he mean it solely as metaphor, such as when he says, “Even during the evolutionary period the universe is in itself nothing but imagination”? (*Discourses*, p. 24) Or does he mean to say that our human imagination and the imagination of the spiritual path are one and the same?

The way I understand it is that the faculty of our imagination is one and the same as God's faculty of imagination, which is the same imagination employed in the creation of the universe, and the same imagination comprising experiences of the spiritual path. I understand it this way because of Baba's explanations regarding two other key components of experience: consciousness and thinking. Baba makes it clear that consciousness is fully developed in humans. Our consciousness is the same consciousness which will be employed in consciousness of God when our soul becomes realized. What changes is not consciousness per se, but rather what one is conscious of.

Likewise, in *Infinite Intelligence*, Baba makes it clear that thinking is fully developed in humans. Man is capable of infinite thinking. But it is thinking of the false and not of the Real. And this thinking is the same thinking that God employed in the creation of the universe, and the same thinking which God will use to think Infinitely in a God-realized soul.

And regarding the Self or the Soul, when traversing the spiritual path Baba states that:

. . .flights of imagination do not bring about any real change in the true being of the Self as it is. What changes is not the Self but its idea of what it is.
(*Discourses*, p. 130)

Just as the Self, and the faculties of thinking and consciousness do not change, so too the nature of imagination does not change. What changes is not imagination, but rather what the soul imagines. Our imagination, our thoughts, our feelings, our consciousness are completely developed as human beings. They are connected with God's imagination, thoughts, feelings, and consciousness. There is a continuum from unconscious God, through evolution, to the human form, and the spiritual path to consciousness of God.

When Baba says, "...the different intermediate stages on the path are all equally creations of the play of imagination" (*Discourses*, p.130), and "all intermediate stages on the path, until final realization of the Goal, consist in leaving one flight of imagination for another" (*Discourses*, p.130), does that mean we employ our imagination as a means to traverse the spiritual path? I believe yes, that is what Baba means by "play of imagination".

But if the stages of the spiritual path are created through the play of imagination, and if my imagination is linked with God's imagination, can I simply will my imagination to have spiritual experience?

If only it were that simple. In truth, the opposite is necessary. One cannot willfully imagine one's way to spiritual experience. Rather, self-centered imagination must be relinquished. As Baba states:

With the surrenderance of self-will and ego-centered imagination, there arises a true perception of the infinite worth of that which IS. (*Discourses*, p. 130)

So self-will and self-centered imagination must be relinquished. But how then is one to use imagination? It is after all one of the basic elements of human nature. The answer lies in NOT using it, in not willfully employing imagination. Instead one must recognize the falseness of imagination, curtail its use, and shed it. As Baba states:

The building up of a sense of separateness is a result of flights of imagination. Therefore the breaking through of the self-created sense of separateness and being united with Reality is secured through reversing the false working of imagination. (*Discourses*, p.130)

Even when imagination is curtailed, it will not completely disappear. Rather one form of imagination will be replaced by a more subtle form. Baba explains the different degrees of subtlety:

The shedding of one fold of the veil of imagination . . . means renouncing the more false imagination in favor of the less false imagination. There are different degrees of falseness of imagination corresponding to the degrees of the sense of separateness constituted by ego-consciousness. . . . But all intermediate stages on the path . . . consist in leaving one flight of imagination for another. They do not amount to cessation of imagination. (*Discourses*, p. 120)

When one form of imagination is curtailed, another form of imagination pops up. This newer form of imagination cannot be self-willed, and thus it will be experienced as being spontaneous. The newer form of imagination will seem to happen through its own volition. It will not be controlled by one's ego, and thus it will appear to be controlled and originating from a source outside of oneself, and as something objective, for example as the sound I heard in Baba's bedroom.

Therefore spiritual experience must be spontaneous, and it must appear to originate from a source external to oneself. All sights, sounds and objects experienced will appear to be totally real, an external world unto itself.

How is it possible for spiritual experience that is produced by our own imagination to appear absolutely real? Isn't imagination false? Don't we know that it is false? But in fact spiritual experience is more real than the so-called physical reality we experience every day of our lives.

To understand how imaginative experience can appear real we need only look at our own dreams. Dreams are also a product of spontaneous non-ego controlled imagination. It's our imagination that creates the scenes, people, and objects we encounter in dreams. And yet, while we dream, all of those elements appear absolutely, completely real. We don't experience ourselves as our dreams' creator. The elements of the dream appear to exist outside of ourselves. Yet dreaming takes place entirely within our minds.

The same is true of spiritual experience, and so there is a strong similarity between dreaming and spiritual experience. In fact, Baba often drew similarities between the spiritual path and dreaming, referring to the path as dreaming while awake. He states:

The act of getting rid of imagination altogether may be compared with the act of awakening from deep sleep. The different stages in the process of ridding oneself of false imagination might be compared with the dreams that often serve as a bridge between deep sleep and full wakefulness. (*Discourses*, p. 130)

The spontaneous release of imagination happens during sleep, when the mind stops thinking. Dreams then emerge. I understand spontaneous imagination to be the result of impressions (sanskaras) emerging out of subconsciousness into consciousness. Normally, impressions are too dominant to make for a quiet mind; they seek expression through desires and potential action. But if impressions are less powerful, it's possible for a spontaneous release of subconscious material when the mind is made temporarily silent. A silent mind mitigates the ego, which normally functions as a barrier, keeping subconscious material from entering into consciousness. So when thoughts diminish and consequently impressions diminish in strength, the barrier of the ego is weakened, the sense of oneself controlling one's imagination is lessened, and subconscious material enters consciousness.

Spontaneous release of imagination also occurs in spiritual experience when the mind temporarily enters silence. It can also happen during meditation.

One of the goals of meditation is to silence the mind, which Baba says is extremely difficult to achieve. (*Discourses*) To work toward that goal, he recommends alternating one's focus between two incompatible forms of meditation. Rapid alternation between concentration and distraction leads to quieting the mind. Through this process the mind

can be made temporarily silent. Spontaneous imagination can then be brought into play. As Baba says:

Meditation should be spontaneous and not forced. In the moments of the surging up of divine impulses, imagination should be let loose and allowed to soar. The flight of imagination should be controlled only by the set purpose of becoming one with the Infinite. It should not be influenced by the currents of the diverse feelings of lust, greed, or anger. (*Discourses*, p. 52)

As I mentioned, I began to practice meditation as Baba outlined in his *Discourses* during the period when I was coming to him. And I have continued to meditate accordingly since. Some years ago I began to feel his love and bliss regularly while meditating. In the intensity of the bliss, his presence felt totally real. But I questioned it, as I was also fully aware that his presence was experienced through my imagination. So was it real? Was I deluding myself?

During a pilgrimage to India, I explained my situation to Eruch and asked, “Was I deluding myself?” His answer surprised me. He explained that when there are feelings of peace and love, there is no delusion. More recently I read in *Lord Meher* that in 1937 Baba had told the Western women living in the Nasik Ashram something very similar.

Now what is the difference between hallucination and spiritual experience? In hallucination you see things – extraordinary things – but you never feel blissful or peaceful. This is the only sure sign of differentiating between hallucination and spiritual experience. When it is hallucination, bliss and peace are not possible. In the state of delusion too, bliss and peace are not possible. (Kalchuri, p. 2137)

In fact, hallucination and delusion are the result of a hyperactive mind of a person who is mentally or emotionally ill. In such cases normal mental operations which serve to repress subconscious material are disrupted, allowing the release of uncontrolled spontaneous imagination, similar to but not the same as spontaneous imagination comprising spiritual experience.

When I approached Eruch on the subject of delusion, I was specifically referring to experiencing Baba’s presence. But what about receiving communication from Baba? How can one trust that communication which one perceives as coming from Baba isn’t delusional? For after all, receiving communication from Baba is accomplished through one’s own imagination. And that imagination is under sway of one’s ego and mental impressions.

I believe this question is important because Baba stressed that his lovers should strive to make him their constant companion. So the question is, when using the term “companionship” was Baba referring to feeling his presence, or did he also use the term to mean communication? I don’t know the answer. As for myself, I stay away from seeking answers from Baba, because in the past when I did seek his advice, I would lose the sense of his presence.

But this is not to say that I have not had moments of intuition and inspiration, as have many others. And I attribute these moments of clarity to Baba. But I do not take them as direct messages from Baba, or believe that Baba is speaking to me. Rather I take them as inspired by Baba. I believe the key lies in remembering that Baba was and is silent. Therefore when perceiving communication from him, I remember that I am interpreting Baba’s silent communication through the use of my imagination. The truth of the communication will be in proportion to the degree that imagination is curtailed, or in other words, in proportion to the degree that I silence my mind. Because it is in a quiet, silent mind that intuition and inspiration are found. As Baba says:

... only in internal Silence is Baba found — in profound inner Silence. I am never silent. I speak eternally. The voice that is heard deep within the soul is My voice — the voice of inspiration, of intuition, of guidance. Through those who are receptive to this voice, I speak. (Davy, pp. 166–67, 179)

As we see, imagination is employed in many aspects of spiritual life, including relating to the master, during meditation and in spiritual experience, all of which occur prior to being stationed on the path. What is the role of imagination for one on the path? As I understand it (though it is not based upon experience), the difference between spiritual experience and being stationed on a higher plane of consciousness is that in spiritual experience imagination is not controlled, whereas on the spiritual path one has gained control of it. What was at first spontaneous, arising from subconscious elements, gradually becomes conscious and controlled.

When one enters a new plane of consciousness, one is at first dazed. Dazzling sights and sounds enchant one, making one dysfunctional. One’s old sense of who one is has been replaced with a new, but not yet defined ego. One is not yet in control of one’s experience. But gradually, one gains control of that which was originally spontaneously imagined. As one gains control, the experience which at first was enchanting becomes the norm. This control of higher forms of imaginative experience gives one occult powers.

There are many who would not accept that the path to God lies through imagination. They might likely ask, How can one use something false, imagination, to take them to the ultimate Truth, to God? They know without a doubt that imagination is false, whereas God is real. How can the false lead to the real?

What they may not realize is that imagination is not only employed along the path to God, but it is also the essential building block of all of one's perceptions, both of the world and oneself. The essence of what one thinks and perceives oneself to be is built upon nothing but imagination.

But how is it possible that I am nothing but imagination? I seem so very real to myself. I am fully aware when I use my imagination and when I don't. I can certainly tell the difference between what is real and what is imagined. And yet, because of what Baba tells us, I fully accept the fact that I and the world I live in are indeed nothing but a figment of my own imagination.

I believe that the crystallization of imagination into a false reality is recapitulated in early childhood development. To help comprehend how this can be true, we can look to psychology to understand how one develops a perception of the world and oneself.

Psychology differentiates between sensations and perceptions. Sensation is the physical reception of stimuli such as light, sound, and touch through the senses. Perception gives meaning to what is sensed. Until sensations are transformed into perceptions, they remain simply sights, sounds, and feelings. Objects are not recognized, and sounds are not understood. No meaning is ascribed to sensations until stimuli reach higher brain centers. Then the mind interprets sensations and forms perceptions.

Newborn infants have very limited perception. They primarily respond to sensations. I propose that an infant's development of perception is acquired through imagination.

Psychologists have determined through experiments that in the first few months of life an infant's vision is blurry. Infants do not recognize objects. Likewise, they hear sounds but do not recognize words.

If infants think at all, they must think in primitive ways, because they have no language with which to express thoughts. Therefore, it is likely that their thinking is the spontaneous replaying of impressions of sights, sounds, and feelings that have entered their being through their senses. This spontaneous replay occurs through their imagination.

And through this replay they begin to make associations between various stimuli. They have felt when their bodies were touched. They have seen their bodies being touched. They imagine an association between what they have felt and what they have seen. Eventually, the repeated imagined associations become solidified, forming a perception that what they are feeling and what they are seeing are one and the same thing.

Imagination which gets played over and over again and which is reinforced by stimuli from the outside world gradually transforms from fantasy into something totally

believable and eventually solidifies into a reality. In the above example, through a process of imagining, an infant will eventually perceive himself as being his body. But the foundation of his perception and identity that he is a body is really just derived out of his imagining.

As a child continues to grow older, he continues to construct through his imagination a concept of who he is in terms of the world and other people. Eventually, with the development of language, the many imaginations become perceptions crystallized into words. And through perception and language a child develops understanding. He learns that he is separate from his environment, and just as importantly, he learns that there are others. In this process, he develops an ego-centered self. As Baba says:

The ego-consciousness has crystallized out of the working of the manifold false imagination . . . the entire structure of the ego, which has been built during the period of the false working of imagination.
(*Discourses*, p. 129)

In this way, through imagination, infants and young children not only develop perception and understanding of themselves and the world in which they live, but also they actively participate in the creation of their ego and their world. And continuing into adulthood, perception remains the means of creating one's world. Baba says of perception:

The process of perception runs parallel to the process of creation, and the reversing of the process of perception without obliterating consciousness amounts to realizing the nothingness of the universe as a separate entity.
(*Discourses*, p. 190)

Perception runs parallel to the process of creation, because as humans we create our worlds through our perception. Through perception, imagination is crystallized, thereby creating the physical world and ourselves.

Reversing the process of perception occurs when one reverts to a more primary form of mental processing. In normal mental processing, incoming energy (sights, sounds, and feelings) flow from sensation into perception. When reversed, perception is not employed, and one directly experiences sensations without interpretation through intellect or imagination. Like an infant who has not yet developed perception, one directly experiences sensations, but the difference is that it is now done with full consciousness. In this more primary mental processing, the intellect and imagination are curtailed, thereby releasing the crystallized imaginative structure comprising the ego. The released imagination is expressed spontaneously. The energy which was crystallized into gross, physical forms is released and experienced as spontaneous imagination in the form of energy – sights, sounds and feelings belonging to the subtle

(energy) plane of consciousness. The world one has known is seen as having been the product of imagination, i.e., nothing but an illusion.

Entering a higher plane of consciousness is much like a death-rebirth experience. The ego and the perceived world of the lower plane are destroyed. A pilgrim is reborn on a higher plane. Like an infant, a pilgrim is at first dazed by the spontaneous imaginative experiences. And then, like an infant, he gradually gains control of spontaneous imagination. He acquires an understanding of the new world in which he lives, and a new sense of self emerges through crystallization of the spontaneous imagination. The pilgrim is then established on a higher plane.

Why is it that everything is based upon imagination? Our sense of self, our perceptions of the world, and the path to God are all based upon imagination. Why?

It is because, as Baba often states, the universe is simply an illusion, a product of God's imagination. But why? Why can't his creation be real? It is because it is impossible for the universe to exist. It is utterly impossible for anything to exist in Reality other than God. The universe does not exist in Reality, but, as Baba says, the universe

. . . is an outcome of Nothing and is nothing. It only *seems* to have existence. . . . The one Reality remains what it was, complete and absolute in itself and unconcerned and unconnected with the panorama of creation that springs out of Nothing.

Therefore:

The whole evolutionary process is within the domain of imagination. (*Discourses*, p.25)

And so, it is God's imagination which produces the universe. And it is God's imagination which evolves the universe. And it is God's imagination which that endows us with our own imagination. And through curtailment of our imagination, one is led along the path to God. It is the same one faculty of imagination which creates the universe, evolves it, and "involves" it through higher forms of imagination, until a soul can see God and eventually become one with God.

So returning to my experience in Baba's bedroom. Was it just my imagination? Yes, in a certain sense it was just my imagination. But so is every other aspect of my life based upon imagination; I just don't realize it. And, in his bedroom, inspired by his presence, I temporarily curtailed my imagination by quieting my mind. Baba's presence induced a truer form of imagination. It was he who evoked the experience. And by doing so, Baba revealed his omnipresence to me. Although he had dropped his body, he demonstrated

to me that not only did he exist in that moment, but that he is ever present and always available.

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