



# THE THREE STAGES OF IMAGERY

*Imagination & consciousness*

Jan Taal

## THE THREE STAGES OF IMAGERY

### *Imagination & consciousness*

**Imagining is the core-function of the psyche. Every action, each new step in our development is generated by our image of it. The inner world of our imagination forms the central arena within which we become who we are and explore our possibilities.**

‘Have you put something in my tea?’ asks Sylvia in astonishment. She has just returned from an imaginative journey to a wonderful garden and she is feeling euphoric. I hadn’t put anything in her tea of course, I had simply helped her to open herself to her own inner world and then to enter into concentrated contact with what she discovered there.

Days later Sylvia is still feeling the physical effects of her experience. That’s how strong imagery<sup>1</sup> can be, it can bring us into contact with a whole other dimension where unprecedented forces have their being, a dimension which exists beyond the bounds of time and space. It is however a dimension which has its own pitfalls, particularly if we do not have the necessary strength to cope with the immeasurable forces which dwell there.

A distinguishing feature of imagery is that it can take us into a deeper state of consciousness. As we become more involved in our inner imagery, we can enter a kind of natural trance-like state, in very much the way that when we are gripped by a film, a book or a piece of music we can completely enter into and lose all sense of time. Carl Jung said that as we make full contact with an image, it’s as if it becomes *pregnant*. The image unfolds and reveals the energy contained within it, much as a window opens on our computer screen when we click on it.

Within the bounds of ‘ordinary’ consciousness, time and space are representative of the well-known four dimensions. Imagery opens us up to a fifth dimension, where time and space appear to be relative and where in principle, everything is possible. It is in this dimension that we can be fully free, it is here that we can create our own reality.

#### *The defining features of the fifth dimension are:*

- intense consciousness;
- a trance-like, dream-like state; visions;
- the experience of timelessness and a dissolving of spatial boundaries;
- images which are charged with symbolic psychic energy;
- experience of a subtle body or energy field;
- contact with sources of revitalizing energy as well as with unassimilated elements in de psyche.

#### **A powerful psychological resource**

We speak, think and feel in images and act according to those images. Who we really are is reflected in our conscious and unconscious inner

1. Imagery is the term I use for the conscious use of the imagination. It is used in many therapy, counseling, coaching and training methods, including hypnotherapy, EMDR, mindfulness and cognitive behavioural therapy, although usually in a limited way. There are many imagery techniques and various ways in which imagery can be guided- it can be done with eyes open or closed, in silence, actively, in dialogue, in movement or via an art form. There are always as many ‘inner senses’ involved as possible – seeing, hearing, touching, feeling, smelling, etcetera.

imagery. Our imagination is probably the most powerful psychological resource we possess. It is in this domain that we can be influenced the most, psychologically, physically and behaviourally. Small wonder that demagogues, politicians and advertising campaigns make extensive use of imagery.

Assagioli calls imagination the core-function of the psyche. It forms an essential phase which precedes and prompts all action.<sup>2</sup> Neurologist Ramachandran puts it like this: the imaginative faculty is part of what makes us essentially human and it colours and gives form to our experience of ourselves and of the world.<sup>3</sup>

Just how important imagery is for us is evident in the fact that we constantly use images to describe our experience: ‘I was really down in the dumps’, ‘I was walking on air’, ‘My heart sang’, ‘We ran like the wind’, ‘This business stinks’, ‘They all want a piece of the cake’, ‘That was a sour look!’, ‘She spoke in honeyed tones’ etc.

Of the spontaneous functions of the psyche, imagination is probably the most influential in that it gives us access to creativity, the place where we are at our most free.



Illustration 1. Cave painting at Chauvet, 34,000 years old.

### As old as humanity

As far as we can know, images, visions, daydreams, stories, myths and symbols have always played a vital social, political and therapeutic role, in every era and in all cultures. Reaching far back into prehistory and in every corner of the globe we find symbols in caves and graves, on bones and fragments of pottery, in sculpted objects and figures as well as in myths, stories and folk-tales.<sup>4</sup> Fascinating forms of expression are to be found all over the world and in Europe some of the most extraordinary examples can be seen in the caves of Chauvet (35,000 years old: Illustration 1.) and Lascaux (17,000 years old: Illustration 2.)

2. Assagioli, R. 1965. *Psychosynthesis: a manual of principles and techniques*.

3. Ramachandran, V.S. 2000. Mirror Neurons and Imitation Learning as the Driving Force behind “The Great Leap Forward” in Human Evolution. *Edge*, 69.

4. Eliade, M. (1952). *Images et symboles*; Campbell, J. (1949). *The hero with a thousand faces*;

Campbell, J. (1983). *Historical atlas of world mythology, Vol. I: The way of the animal powers*;

Jung, C.G. (1964). *Man and his Symbols*; Walsh, R. (2007). *The World of Shamanism: New Views of an Ancient Tradition*;

Clottes, J. & Lewis-Williams, D. (1996). *Les Chamanes de la Préhistoire*.

For many years it was thought that these paintings were intended to depict scenes from daily life (hunting for example), but in recent times this theory has proved to be scientifically unviable as far as most prehistoric art is concerned. Most archaeologists are now convinced that the caves in Spain and France are ‘sacred sites’, where art served spiritual and ritual purposes. But what were these? In the last twenty years the ‘shamanic’ theory has gained increasing support within the scientific community. According to this theory, in prehistoric times the paintings served as a medium for making contact with the ‘other world’, the inner world of the spirit. The animals represented there are not meant to show the ‘ordinary’ reality of space and time, but are intended as a representation of a fifth dimensional realm.



Illustration 2: *Painting of ‘Meeting between bird-man and bison’, in the shaft of the Lascaux cave, 17,000 years old.*

### The mythology of indigenous peoples and modern physics

Anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss made some very interesting discoveries during his studies of indigenous peoples. He found such a striking similarity between their ancient myths and the language and concepts of modern physics, that he described the discoveries of quantum mechanics as our modern myth. Reality (‘out there’) is not a ‘fixed’ one, as we in our ordinary consciousness perceive, but is more like a field of possibilities which depends entirely on the way we measure (perceive) it.

By means of ever farther-reaching calculations, scientists have gained insights into micro and macro-realities which far exceed our ‘normal’ consciousness. Big bang theory, expanding and contracting universes, particles that can be at various positions simultaneously or communicate beyond time and space – these are all concepts of mythic proportions. Modern physicist appears reluctantly but unmistakably to have entered into the domain of the mystical. String theory for instance already provides us with at least 11 dimensions of reality.

Lévi-Strauss speaks of the return of the mythic in modern physics.<sup>5</sup> According to Lévi-Strauss, myths give us a valuable indication of the way in which the human psyche works and they represent transcendent knowledge about fundamental human issues such as life and death, social relationships, our sense of meaning and our place in the cosmos.

Christian mythology in the western culture is also full of fifth dimensional imagery, starting with the miracle of the immaculate conception and ending with Christ's resurrection.



*The veneration of Mary and child; the miracle of the immaculate conception. Geertgen tot Sint Jans, circa 1495, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam.*



*Resurrection of Jesus, fresco by Giovanni Canavesio, 1491, in the Notre-Dame des Fontaines Chapel, La Brigue. France.*

## Imagination, medicine and neuropsychology

In the history of medicine, imagery is probably the oldest diagnostic and curative tool, forming the basis for the healing rites which have existed since time immemorial.<sup>6</sup> Through their research, modern neuropsychologists have rediscovered the central role which the imagination plays in learning processes and in the development of new behaviours. Since the discovery in 1996 of the phenomenon mirror neurons, a fast-growing number of findings serve to indicate just how significant a part imagination plays in the ability to change behaviour.<sup>7</sup> Mirror neurons are brain cells which are activated by what we perceive as well as by what we imagine. Imagining an action creates almost as much brain activity (90%) as the perceiving or performing of a similar action.<sup>8</sup>

When we imagine, new neural pathways (chemical connections and electrical impulses) are formed and the behaviour which corresponds with what we are imagining is stimulated.<sup>9</sup> Every new development starts with our image of it. In the field of physical rehabilitation after injury and in the sports world motor imagery is now widely applied. It is proven that motor imagery, observation and execution rely on the same neural processes.<sup>10</sup>

5. Claude Lévi-Strauss. 1991. Retour des Mythes, in: *Histoire de L'ynx*.

6. Achterberg, J. (1985). *Imagery in healing: shamanism and modern medicine*.

7. Rizzolatti G, Fadiga L, Gallese V, Fogassi L. (1996). Premotor cortex and the recognition of motor actions. *Brain Res Cogn Brain Res*. 3, 131–141.

8. Kosslyn, S.M. & Moulthon, S.T. Mental Imagery and Implicit Memory. In: Markman, K.D., Klein, W.M.P. & Suhr, J.A. 2009. *Handbook of Imagination and Mental Simulation*. 35-51.

9. Iacoboni, I. 2008. *Mirrorig People – The new science of how we connect with others*;

Markman, K.D., Klein, W.M.P. & Suhr, J.A. 2009. *Handbook of Imagination and Mental Simulation*.

10. Vries, S. de, Mulder, T. 2007. Motor imagery and stroke rehabilitation: A critical discussion. *Journal of Rehabilitation Medicine*. 39: 5–13

## The placebo effect

Probably the biggest mystery in the whole of modern medicine is the fact that a pill which contains no active ingredient whatsoever can nevertheless produce a healing effect. The same applies to a ‘pretend’ injection or a ‘pretend’ operation.<sup>11</sup>

The factors which evoke the expectation (imagination) of cure or relief are notably the size, price and colour of the placebo-pill, the conviction and enthusiasm of the doctor (the doctor as a walking placebo) and the novelty of the medication. It appears that a placebo by means of our expectations and imagination can awaken an ‘inner therapist’ or ‘inner pharmacy’. The placebo uses the power of our imaginative faculty to stimulate our capacity for self-reinforcement.<sup>12</sup>

## The three stages of imagery

If we wish to enter the realm of the fifth dimension and benefit from it, skill and strength is necessary and the technical term for this is ‘ego-strength’. Can I find my way in the wondrous inner world and can I maintain my autonomy, or will I be taken over by the forces which reside in that immense realm? The mastery of the skills we need can be divided into three stages.

### The first stage

The process of imagery begins with the discovery that inner images have great impact. Our unconscious self-images and our perception of the world constantly influence our feelings, thoughts and behaviour. Becoming aware of the images that influence us can be a huge and often confronting revelation and this experience forms the first step in the process.

At first the images maybe observed like scenes in a theatre and one may leave it at that, Carl Jung wrote. But if the observer understands that his own drama is being performed on this inner stage, he cannot remain indifferent, and he will notice that he is being addressed by the unconscious, that the images have a purposeful relationship to his conscious situation. By engaging with our images we get to know aspects of our nature which we would not allow anybody else to show us and which we ourselves would never have admitted.<sup>13</sup>

### The second stage

In the next stage we discover that we can exert influence upon our images and that within this inner world of images we can take action, make adjustments and even effect transformation. This is the area in which most therapy and coaching work is done, where we learn to navigate in the enormous arena of conscious and unconscious self-images, drives and potential talents and where true autonomy can be developed. Imagery has many techniques to offer for this.<sup>14</sup> The cases of Liesbeth and Clara at the end of this article provide examples of the second stage.

### The third stage

It is a well-kept secret that we are quite possibly the creators of our own

11. Nanninga, R. (2002). Schijn doet wonderen. *Skepter*, 15, nr. 4.

12. Brody, H. (1997). The Doctor as a Therapeutic Agent. In: A. Harrington (ed). *The Placebo Effect. An Interdisciplinary Exploration*;

Mittendorff, C. (2009). *Dromen of tranen. Wat coaches kunnen leren van de resultaten uit psychotherapeutisch onderzoek*.

Taal, J. (2012). *Het placebo mysterie ontrafeld*. [www.imaginatie.nl](http://www.imaginatie.nl)

13. Jung, C.G. *Mysterium Coniunctionis: An Inquiry into the Separation and Synthesis of Psychic Opposites in Alchemy*, p. 495. London: Routledge.

14. Taal, J. (1994). Imaginatie-therapie. *Tijdschrift voor Psychotherapie*, 4, 227-246.

Taal, J. (2015). *Coping with cancer through imagery and artistic expression*. [www.imaginatie.nl](http://www.imaginatie.nl).

Taal, J. (2012). Verbeeldingstoolkit. *Psychosociale Oncologie*, 20, 2. p. 22;

Taal, J. & en Krop, J. (2003). Imagery in the treatment of trauma. In A.A. Sheikh (Ed.), *Healing Images: The Role of Imagination in Health*.

15. Ramachandran, V.S. 2010. *The Tell-Tale Brain: A Neuroscientist's Quest for What Makes Us Human*, p. 229.

inner world and thereby of our own feelings, our own behaviour and our own lives. It is an ancient secret which in the present day is being embraced by some neuropsychologists, for instance Ramachandran proposed that we are constantly hallucinating when we look at the world.<sup>15</sup>

In the third stage we come to the realization that ‘our inner world’ of feelings, convictions, complexes and self-images, in fact determines our experience of the world ‘out there’. In becoming conscious of this, we can become capable of owning all aspects of our psyche, energies, emotions, tendencies and convictions, which we find within us. We learn to cope with them and we discover the creative capacity by which life in all its many facets is brought into being.

Carl Jung in his last major publication postulated that both the observer and connected phenomenon ultimately stem from an underlying unified transcendental reality from which everything emerges and to which everything returns, the *Unus Mundus*.<sup>16</sup> The third stage culminates in a state of consciousness in which ‘owner’ and ‘creator’ become one, in which the inner and the outer world spring from the same source and where the barriers of time and space prove to be an illusion. Subject (I) and object (the world) merge in an experience of complete non-duality. This extraordinary realization of oneness is a common experience in all forms of mysticism<sup>17</sup>. Rumi<sup>18</sup> puts this mystical truth into words in this beautiful story:

A man knocked on his friend’s door. From within he heard his friend’s voice: ‘Who’s there? Is it you?’ ‘Yes’, said the man, ‘It’s me!’ ‘Oh it’s you is it?’ said the voice from within. ‘Well you can go away again, there’s no place for you here.’ Deeply disappointed, the man turned and walked away. For many long years he wandered the world in disillusionment. It was years before he dared to go to his friend’s house again. With his heart in his mouth he knocked on the door. ‘Who’s there?’ came the voice from within. ‘Is it you?’ ‘No’, replied the man, ‘It’s not me, it’s you!’ ‘Oh’, cried the friend, opening the door, ‘then come inside quickly, my beloved friend, for there is no place for two here.’

Hadewijch,<sup>19</sup> also in the thirteenth century, expresses in her seventh vision the experience of mystical unity in yet another way:

I saw a great eagle flying from the altar straight towards me and he said to me: If thou wilt become one, prepare then thyself for this. I fell to my knees and my heart beat wildly in the fervour and longing of my prayer.

And the eagle spoke thus: ‘Show now thy power so that thou art in state to join in unity and to surrender thy separateness’. After this He (Christ) descended from the altar. As a child did He appear before me. And from the chalice he took his body and it was the body of a man, soft and pure, so beautiful to me.

And He came to me and He gave himself to me. He took me wholly and utterly in his arms and pressed me to him and all of my body felt all of his body, to my whole heart’s desire and longing and to my complete satiation.

After this I lost that beautiful outer Man. He melted away in

16. Jung, C.G. (1963). *Mysterium Coniunctionis: An Inquiry into the Separation and Synthesis of Psychic Opposites in Alchemy*. p. 533 – 538. London: Routledge.

17. Jung, C.G. 1954. Psychological Commentary. In: W.Y. Evans-Wentz. *The Tibetan Book of the Great Liberation*. p. xlvi. London: Oxford University Press.

18. Perzisch dichter Jala al-Din Rumi was born in 1207 in Balkh in present-day Afghanistan and died in 1273 in Konya in Turkey.

19. Hadewijch was a 13th-century Flemish Beguine, poet and mystic. Most of her extant writings are in a Brabantian form of Middle Dutch.

oneness with me and he was within me and could not be separated from me. We were One. So entirely One with my Beloved was I, that nothing else of me was left.<sup>20</sup>

In the third stage self and universe become one; this is a universal theme in all world religions. In the Upanishads (India), the union is compared with two birds in the tree of life. The one bird is endlessly ‘doing’; locked in her ego, she is busy eating fruit, either enjoying it or sickened by it, whilst the other bird, eternal and ego-less, leaves the fruit for what it is, keeping himself available to be present to the ‘ego-bird’ and to give her his loving support as soon as she notices him.



Two birds. *Mundaka Upanishads*. Painting by Caroline Willebrands

This universal theme of union is also beautifully represented in Rembrandt’s etching of the return of the prodigal son – for me this is about the surrender to our Greater Self, the pure source of life and of all our qualities and possibilities which has always been there waiting patiently to welcome us home.

<sup>20</sup>. Oostrom, F. van. (2006). *Stemmen op schrift*. p. 425-426.



*The return of the prodigal son*. Rembrandt (1636), Rembrandthuis, Amsterdam

## Case study I

### *LIESBETH*

#### Heroic struggle

After suffering a series of blows in her life, Liesbeth (54 years) has fallen prey to deep depression. She realizes that she has tried all her life to 'get it right', but she feels that she has failed completely. Gradually, over a number of years, the depression has tightened its hold on her.

This series of drawings shows how she is confronted with demonic powers and how she eventually succeeds in being healed. This is a truly heroic struggle.



Rage towards the child who is a failure. Liesbeth has been deeply depressed for several years and thinks that everything she does is wrong. In the image which she receives, there are judgmental, deadly eyes which bore into her as she lies as a child on the ground, utterly brought down and powerless.



I am beset by monsters who want to beat me down.



I connect with something larger...  
I can straighten up and I find  
the light, the other dimension.



I am trapped but I see that I can go either of two ways. One way is dark and destructive, it will break me. The other way is wild, hopeful and powerful.



Imprisoned in a dark cocoon.



I go towards the light and help comes. It is soft and it cleanses and heals me, I spuw snakes.

Besieged by an evil wave and tar which is thrown over me. I run towards the light but it is very hard because of the negative energies which keep hounding me.



Healing hands.

After all the struggling I feel as free as a bird, filled with amazement but also with fear because finally I can do what I want to do but the world is very big and I don't yet know how to sing and how to fly.



## Case study II

### CLARA

#### Becoming capable owner of yourself

Clara is caught in a conflict between her head and her gut feelings. She has a responsible leadership role at work and a large family as well. Her head is always racing and filled with crackle. In her gut there is pain and tears (drawing 1.)



Drawing 1



Drawing 2

As she looks inside Clara realizes that there are four parts of her personality which are at war with each other. Each part represents an important quality (drawing 2).

#### *Hammer*

The hammer is the driving power in her. 'Keep going, don't stop' is what this part says. This is a quality which she make good use of in her busy life.

#### *Cigar*

The cigar stands for taking on a challenging project and then afterwards, if it was successful, enjoying the satisfaction with a good cigar.

#### *Child*

The child is her playfulness, the part which wants to be spontaneous and carefree.

#### *Earth mother*

The earth mother is the one who cares about everybody and who wants to look after the whole world.

In drawings 3 and 4 we can see how Clara is getting better at coordinating the four parts. To begin with they all go on the bike with her but she notices that it's a very bumpy and difficult road. She decides

to create a car and all the parts now have a comfortable place to sit and there is even room for a fifth part which turns up. This image is of huge help to Clara in managing her daily life. She succeeds in giving more time and room to each of the parts. Each one has its own value and she is now a capable coordinator.



Drawing 3



Drawing 4



[www.imaginatie.nl](http://www.imaginatie.nl)

#### Colofon

##### *Author*

Jan Taal Drs (1949) is trainer-director of the School for Imagery in Amsterdam in the Netherlands and health care psychologist BIG NIP NVPO.  
Contact: [JanTaal@imaginatie.nl](mailto:JanTaal@imaginatie.nl);  
[www.imaginatie.nl](http://www.imaginatie.nl)

Illustration front page: Jacobs dreamy fight/encounter with the angel.  
Rembrandt, 1660. Gemäldegalerie der Staatlichen Museen, Berlin.

© 2015 Jan Taal, School voor Imaginatie

School for Imagery, Amsterdam,  
The Netherlands.  
0031 - 20 - 673 13 95  
[info@imaginatie.nl](mailto:info@imaginatie.nl)  
[www.imaginatie.nl](http://www.imaginatie.nl)

##### *Graphic design*

Rick Angenent: graphic design.