

The Inner Figure: Synchronistic Images of the Soul

by Cedrus Monte

Introduction

The Inner Figure is a process that involves making a figure of clay and other materials which forms itself around a numinous, or archetypal experience. It is a course in active imagination which I developed out of studying ritual doll-making, ritual theatre, and Jungian psychology.¹

The main focus of this discussion is to illustrate how synchronistic phenomena are related to the imaginal realm and the process of image-making. I use the *The Inner Figure*, a nine-month long class which I have taught since 1983, as the primary example for the image-making process. At the conclusion of the discussion are two individual stories from *The Inner Figure* course, demonstrating the unique nature of the synchronistic events which form around the making of a figure. The first story is about “Regina”, one of the participants in *The Inner Figure* course. The second story is my own. In each class I make my own figure.

The Imaginal Realm

The soul never thinks without a picture.

– Aristotle

C. G. Jung’s formulation of the unconscious, primarily the collective unconscious, is important to note because it lays the groundwork for the retrieval of the mythical, imaginal

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world view. One could say that Jung returned the soul back to the psyche, primarily through his psychologically vivifying relationship to the unconscious, and to the mythicalizing voice of imagination and image by which it speaks. Jung liberated a whole dimension of human experience or understanding for the non-indigenous Western world by honouring the ubiquitous, *a priori* image-making capacity of humankind. According to Jung, “Every psychic process is an image and an imagining” (CW 6, § 77).

Jung was one of the forerunners in redeeming the imaginal world for 20th-century Western civilization. As such, he helped redeem a well-spring from which life regenerates itself. Imaginal, mythical time is the time in which the origins of life are held. If we consider creation myths in particular, we see that they are universally used to restore and revivify. In Fiji, for example, when feeling something is out of balance, or that life is threatened, or the cosmos, in their view, is exhausted or empty, the Fijians return to the beginning of time, *in principio*, to mythological time, seeking a restored sense of life from its ritual re-creation. “Whenever they are threatened by dissociation and panic and social disorder, they try to restore the creation and the whole cosmos by retelling the creation myth. They create again, as it were, the conscious order of things and then await the corresponding effect upon their souls, which would mean that they once again feel themselves to be in order” (von Franz 1972/95, p. 23).

The phenomenon of imaginal reality presents itself quite pointedly in the writings of Western alchemy which inspired much of Jung’s later formulations on the nature of the psyche. Jung explains that the term *imaginatio* held particular importance in the opus of the alchemists who believed that “the work” must be accomplished with “true imagination”. Jung felt that the fantasy process in alchemy, whereby images of figures were seen in the retort, was of special significance. The imaginal phenomena referred to by the alchemists were “half spiritual, half physical The alchemist related himself not only to the unconscious but directly to the very substance which he hoped to transform through the power of the imagination” (CW 12, § 394). The imaginings were “an intermediate realm between mind and matter, i.e., a psychic realm of subtle bodies whose characteristic is to manifest themselves in a mental as well as material form” (*ibid.*). We see this notion, for example, in the writings of alchemist Raymond Lilly when he says:

You should know, dear son, that the course of nature is turned about so that without invocation ... and without spiritual exaltation you can see certain fugitive spirits condensed in the air in the shape of divers monsters, beasts and men, which move like the clouds hither and thither. (*ibid.*, § 351)

Jung found repeated reference to the necessity of imagination in the alchemists’ writings. One particularly striking statement invokes the following claim:

Imagination is the star in man, the celestial or super-celestial body. (*ibid.*, § 394)

“Star” in this case was understood or translated as the “quintessence” of humankind. Imagination, then, according to the alchemists, is the “quintessence”, or essence, of us. Imagination, our essence, is the subtle-body state of material and spiritual equivalence. Particle and wave are one.

As I will explain more fully later, it is from the ground of the imaginal realm – the subtle-body dimension of matter as spirit, and spirit as matter – that synchronistic experiences arise. From the synchronistic follows the transformative power of the numen: the healing, regenerative shock from contact with the Divine.

In addition to entering mythical, imaginal time through the ritual re-enactment of creation myths and the alchemical opus, the imaginal realm can be accessed through the conscious making of images that arise from the unconscious. I offer *The Inner Figure* as a possible, contemporary example of an imaginative process where life can be potentially recreated, regenerated through the subtle-body world of the synchronistic event.

The Inner Figure

To give both psychological and historical background to our discussion of *The Inner Figure*, we will begin with a fairy tale, followed by other cross-cultural references to dolls or figures.

In Russia, a story is told by the name of *Vasalisa*. It is an initiation story, the initiation into one’s intuition. Sometimes the story is called *Wassalissa the Wise*, or *The Doll* (Estés 1992, p. 75). The story tells us about a young girl whose mother has passed away. Before her mother dies, however, she leaves her daughter a tiny doll, saying, “Here are my last words, Beloved. Should you lose your way or be in need of help, ask this doll what to do. You will be assisted. Keep the doll with you always.” The story continues with Vasalisa’s father remarrying and bringing home two malcontent step-daughters along with his new and equally ungracious wife. These newcomers mistreat Vasalisa terribly, reducing her to the kitchen slave, all the while being terribly jealous of her beauty and goodness. Finally, out of the sheer exasperation and frustration of their own envy, they send her away. They conspire to let the fire in the house go out and enlist Vasalisa as the volunteer to go deep into the forest to retrieve fire from Baba Yaga, fierce and terrifying guardian of the flame. Little Vasalisa dutifully agrees to go. The three women believe this is her doom and that she will never return, to be eaten as dessert by the Baba Yaga.

Vasalisa sets out, doll in pocket. As she progresses deeper into the forest she asks the doll to help guide her through the dark wood. She reaches into her pocket each time a question arises: “Left or right?” “This way or that?” As her dying mother promised, the doll indicates the way. Vasalisa feeds the doll some bread from time to time and follows the impulses she feels coming from the doll. Finally, she reaches the house of Baba Yaga. Standing at the front gate she consults the doll who confirms that this is indeed the place. She has arrived.

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Vasalisa stands in front of the Baba Yaga and humbly asks for fire to save the life of her people, her family. The Baba Yaga is not at all inclined simply to hand over a portion of the burning light unconditionally: Vasalisa must perform a few seemingly impossible tasks first, and then *maybe* she will be given a piece of the flame. She must separate mildewed corn from good corn, dirt from poppy seeds, and do endless lists of things before morning. With the help and guidance of her doll she is able to complete each and every task. She is even able to answer the questions put to her by the Baba Yaga. No easy feat with this Old Hag. But it is the instructions given to her by the doll – jumping in her pocket this way, moving at just the right moment that way – that guide her to the successful completion of her tasks. And so she receives the flame from the Baba Yaga, which is put in one of the skulls decorating Baba Yaga's fence, and is sent on her way. She runs for home, with the doll helping the whole while. Approaching her house, the step-mother and step-daughters rush out to meet her, saying that they had been without fire the entire time, for no matter how hard they tried they could spark not one flame. That night, as the step-mother and the step-sisters sleep, the skull stares at them relentlessly. In the morning, The Ugly Three are found, justifiably burnt to cinders (*ibid.*, p. 75-80).

According to Estés, Vasalisa is a tale of a woman's initiation to the ways of The Wise One, *La Que Sabé*, The One Who Knows (*ibid.*, p. 74). By listening to the messages of the doll, she reaches the Baba Yaga and successfully completes all that is required. The flame is then passed on to her. By learning to trust and follow our intuition, we are initiated into our own reserves of inner knowing, we learn how to tap into the unconscious and move toward making what is unconscious conscious. We become street-wise as we follow the road map of intuitive signals. By listening to the doll and by feeding it, Vasalisa is navigated successfully through the dark of the deep forest, back to her home and on to a life transformed, without the presence of The Three Ugly Ones.

The role of the doll as it appears in *Vasalisa*, as the impulse or vortex of our intuition or inner voice, is directly related to The Inner Figure. But before going more deeply into *The Inner Figure* as an access to intuition, to our inner knowing, I would like to describe other related aspects in the symbolism of the doll or figure to show the wide range that this symbol encompasses, and to illustrate its cross-cultural dimensions.

In different cultures and at different times in history, the figure or doll has been the object of considerable numinosity. From religious icons to the black magic dolls of voodoo, these figures have been seen as the receptor for projections, on the one hand; and for visitations from the gods, on the other. Dolls carry these projections, this life-force infused into them, and are believed then to emanate this vivification. As in the tale of *Vasalisa*, they are able to affect the people and time of their environment. In this sense they are carriers for “energy”, receiving and emanating life-force or mana.

Japanese culture is highly punctuated with doll traditions. In fact, one of the highest art forms in Japan is the art of puppet theatre known as *Bunraku*. Although puppet and doll

traditions of Japan date much earlier, *Bunraku* first appeared in the early sixteenth century. The older doll traditions are connected with religious worship at particular Shinto shrines.

Puppets preserved today at shrines in scattered areas of Japan clearly suggest ancient traditions behind them. In the north, the worship of the god Oshira involves a medium who recites spells and stories accompanied by the two simple stick puppets she operates, one in each hand, raising, lowering, or confronting the puppets as she speaks These Shinto puppets are not representations of divinities ... but, rather, wooden creatures temporarily “possessed” by the gods they recreate, much as the medium herself is believed to repeat, when “possessed”, words uttered by the god himself. Puppet performances at a shrine are intended to depict deeds of the ancient past in order that men of later ages may know the glory of the divinity worshipped there. (Keene 1965, p. 19.)

In churches throughout the world one sees the presence of dolls or figures in statue form. These statues are very carefully tended, often wearing opulent, handmade clothing. They are given a special place of their own in the church where people can come and offer their prayers to the presence that is guarded by and radiates from the figure or statue. These figures are often bathed at different times of the year and are also sometimes taken out of their everyday residence and brought out into the community “so they might see the conditions of the fields and of the people, and therefore intercede with heaven in the human’s behalf” (Estés 1992, p. 88). The Black Madonna at Einsiedeln Monastery in Switzerland is one prominent example of this type of figure. The icons of Russia also have this status, with special times of the year being marked by the procession of the icons into the towns and villages where they reside.

In this regard, the statue, doll, or figure “is the symbol of what lies buried in humans that is numinous. It is a small and glowing facsimile of the original Self. Superficially it is just a doll. But inversely, there is a little piece of soul that carries all the knowledge of the larger soul-Self. In this way the doll represents the inner spirit ... the voice of inner reason, inner knowing, and inner consciousness” (*ibid.*, p. 88). And because of this the doll, or figure, can intercede on our behalf; it is a vortex through which spirit and matter are inter-related.

As we shall see below, *The Inner Figure* process consciously allows for the voice of inner knowing and inner consciousness to present itself to the image-maker.

The Inner Figure Process

The figures made in this course arise out of a process known in Jungian psychology as active imagination. This process can also be seen as a form of ritual image-making. Whichever perspective one takes – Jungian, ritualistic or otherwise – in working with the figures, one is working with the evocation of the inner voice in image form. Through the meditative act of making *The Inner Figure* one constellates a mirror of the soul.

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Approximately nine months of story, prayer, and envisioning go into each of the figures, which are both vessel and mirror for these experiences. They are both magnet and transmitter for the energy that they invoke and embody. Each figure is a dream in concrete form, a living symbol for the maker of the figure. Years after the figures are completed they can continue to tell their story, much as a dream continues to teach us of ourselves long after it is dreamt.

At each weekly session of the course, the evening is divided into two parts. In the second two hours the actual figure itself is formed. The first part of the evening starts with a simple meditation and ritual where the boundary between the secular world and the sacred or numinous world is drawn. The everyday world is suspended just long enough to recognize, acknowledge and invite the presence of the inner voice: The imaginal realm is activated, the symbols of our individual lives are given time and space to step forward, the personal and collective unconscious offers up the images needing a body. As Vasalisa fed her doll bread, it is during this time that we feed our intuition. Through various forms of meditation, participants are led to different inner characters or images upon which to reflect, or who actually communicate something in word or deed. Sometimes an animal appears and offers something; or a childhood memory is recalled; a new person is met and spoken with; or one has a dream-like experience. As in Vasalisa's story, all these are occasions of the doll jumping up and down in our pockets saying, "This way!" "Now that way!" Guiding us on our journey. These experiences are also the nature, the essence, of the figure itself being revealed to us. And the essence of the figure is the quintessential image or message of our intuition which we are building, making, activating, in order to understand what the inner voice wants us to know. Through the doll, or *The Inner Figure*, we are making our dream, living our dream more fully. We are coming awake to it. In Jungian terms, the figure acts as a guide and catalyst in the individuation process.

Synchronicity and The Inner Figure

As previously mentioned, primary to the intention of this inquiry is to describe how *The Inner Figure* process calls forth synchronistic experiences in the lives of the figure-makers, resulting in contact with the healing of the numinous.

Speaking on synchronicity Jung writes:

As it is not limited to the person, it is also not limited to the body. It manifests itself therefore not only in human beings, but also at the same time in animals and even physical circumstances I call these latter phenomena the Synchronicity of archetypal events. For instance, I walk with a woman patient in a wood. She tells me about the first dream in her life that had made an everlasting impression upon her. She had seen a spectral fox coming down the stairs in her parental home. At this moment a real fox comes out of the trees not

40 yards away and walks quietly on the path ahead of us for several minutes. The animal behaves as if it were a partner in the human situation. (Letters, Vol. 1; p. 395, 1973.)

Throughout *The Inner Figure* process the world-at-large offers itself to the course participants in the form of these synchronistic, archetypal events. It is the figure itself, in all its different physical aspects, that registers and holds the events as a whole. For nine months the archetype, and therefore the synchronistic, is courted revealing to each of us, in the end, a piece of our individuation mystery.

Jung proposes that a synchronistic phenomenon consists of two parts. An unconscious content will come into consciousness as some kind of image – a dream, an idea, or a premonition. This image will then correspond to a real situation that occurs in some form, and will coincide with the image in meaning (CW 8, § 426ff). In synchronistic events, “one and the same ... meaning might manifest itself simultaneously in the human psyche and in the arrangement of an external and independent event” (*ibid.*, § 482).

One of the most fundamental aspects, then, in synchronistic events, and what makes synchronicity different than two things simply happening at the same time, is the element of meaning that is constellated as a result of two seemingly disparate events coming into relationship with one another. They are not related to each other causally, but through their equivalent meaning (von Franz 1992, p. 160). Furthermore, the “‘meaning’ of a synchronistic phenomenon visibly participates in the nature of the ‘absolute knowledge’ of the unconscious.... The realization of ‘meaning’ is therefore not a simple acquisition of information or of knowledge, but rather *a living experience that touches the heart just as much as the mind*. It seems to us to be an illumination characterized by great clarity as well as something ineffable – a lightning flash....” (von Franz 1980, p. 257, italics mine). The experience of meaning as thus described – “a lightning flash, a living experience that touches the heart” – occurred frequently during *The Inner Figure* process. Through the participant’s stories, one will observe that in the process of making *The Inner Figure*, a knowledge in the form of symbolic images breaks through, bringing past and/or future events together in and through the concrete symbol of the figure itself, and which is experienced as a sudden realization coming to consciousness.

While the components of synchronistic events are united by their common meaning, they occur *both at the level of matter and psyche*: the two levels coincide. Clinical experience led Jung to understand the archetypes underlying synchronistic events as *psychoid*, i.e., as structuring patterns for both psyche and matter. Von Franz states that it is “quite correct to say that at the moment of a synchronistic event the psyche behaves as if it were matter and matter behaves as if it belonged to an individual psyche ... there is a sort of *coniunctio* of matter and psyche So it is really true that a synchronistic event is an act of creation and a union of two principles normally not connected” (von Franz 1980, p. 116). This liminal, psychoid state was called up again and again in the experience of the doll-course participants, and was also constellated for many people in simply observing the figures themselves for the first time. One had the feeling of entering a numinous dream, in and through the concrete object of the figure.

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Because of the numinosity of the *coniunctio* of matter and psyche, because of the shock it creates to our causal thinking, it can be noted that in times past (and present) these synchronistic events have been called signs of the gods, or miracles. This numinous state of affairs always brings something new into one's life, new growth or awareness, the dimension of the Divine Child. Synchronistic events, then, tend to happen when a person is encouraged or pushed by the unconscious toward a new birth, a creative discovery or toward progress in becoming conscious (von Franz 1992, p. 160). Many of the participants entering *The Inner Figure* course were unequivocally drawn to the process, some without ever having met me before coming to the course, or having seen the figures. They had only heard about the process or the figures from others. It seems apparent to me that the Divine Child was urgently calling for its birth through this process, seeking a way to become conscious in each participant.

Synchronistic events always arise in connection with an activated archetype (CW 8, § 499). Indeed, the only factor that seems to be close to a law in the case of synchronistic phenomena is that they tend to take place when an archetype is strongly constellated in the field of the experiencer. In events that contain the archetypal – death, birth, deeply intimate relationships, life passages – that is, in all the profound events of life that humanity shares, in which the archetypal level of the unconscious is constellated, synchronistic events tend to occur (von Franz 1992, p. 27). One can see these factors clearly operative in *The Inner Figure* process when one carefully observes the evolution of each doll. Especially in cases where synchronistic events occurred quite dramatically, there was the undeniable experience of the numinous at hand, of a profound event which opened the way to further self-realization.

Outside time and outside space, the archetypes are eternal (Jung, 1952 Letters, Vol. 2, p. 46). Because, as previously noted, the archetype and the synchronistic event are directly tied, synchronistic events then are outside the causal, materialistic construct. In this eternal, timeless space we can re-create ourselves, re-address life situations, because it opens or coincides with a space in time for something new and numinous, and therefore potentially healing, to happen. Jung fostered a belief in a *creatio continua*, like certain physicists who believe that there is in the world a place where from time to time new things are created. Jung believed that synchronistic events would be such acts of creation (von Franz 1980, p. 110).

As I described above, it has been my observation that the figures repeatedly become a focal point, a magnet, for the occurrence of synchronistic phenomena, and give us an opportunity to enter the eternal, timeless space where we can re-create ourselves and re-address life situations. *The Inner Figure* process tends to ready the ground, to provide a vessel, for synchronistic occurrences, and therefore for the potentially healing, in that each figure made is virtually, almost without exception, of a numinous, archetypal nature. The archetype is invited, as it were, and therefore the synchronistic. Throughout the entire nine months of meeting each week, space is created after coming in from the everyday, secular world to engender the liminality required for contact with the unconscious, and with the archetypal realm. The burning of sacred herbs, silent meditation, guided meditation, improvisational

movement, spontaneous drawings, the sharing of inner processes, and more, all contribute to the formation of an invitation to the archetype. All these activities serve to create the eternal place of the time / space continuum where something new can emerge. The physical, artistic process of making the figure rests on this ground of preparation. This time is a practice in letting the image emerge, allowing the image to take shape. From these practices the ability to listen to the inner voice is fostered. This voice comes out through the hands of the participants, making its impression through them onto the materials from which the figure is formed.

For Jung, meaning, synchronicity and individuation are intimately related. Where there is synchronicity, and therefore meaning, one also finds (with the proper understanding of the meaningful, synchronistic event) movement towards actualizing and expressing the Self's intent in our lives, a movement known as the process of individuation. In Jung's view, individuation and realization of the meaning of one's life are identical. Individuation means to find one's own meaning, which is nothing less than one's own connection with the universal Meaning. When one encounters this realization of meaning there is the experience of wholeness or unification in one's life. The sudden and illuminating experience, which one encounters with a synchronistic event, represents a momentary unification of two different psychic states: our normal state of consciousness that forms or shapes our idea of what we call the material and external world; and the state of a supra-consciousness where a profound sense of the meaning of the Whole is experienced, the sphere of absolute knowledge.

To summarize, synchronistic experiences revolve around issues of meaning, space-time transcendence, acausality, and the unity of psyche and matter. They always focus on some critical meaning closely associated with the person's individuation at that moment. As the alchemists already believed, and as quantum physics now reveals, synchronistic experiences offer us evidence that psyche and nature, or mind and matter, are not separate or disparate realms. A profound relationship or interconnection between them seems to encourage the soul to understand the same meaning in both realms. *The Inner Figure* is a vessel, alchemical or otherwise, for the synchronistic to arise and for the emergence of individual meaning. The following Inner Figure stories describe the events in this process.

Regina

Let yourself be drawn by the stronger pull of what you really love.
– Rumi

Regina originally heard about *The Inner Figure* from one of the participants who had previously taken the course. She called one evening telling me she would like to attend the nine-month-long process. This she did without ever having met me, or having seen one of the figures. She was also aware of my request that when one starts the course, one makes a commitment to finishing it. The first day of the course was the first day we met.

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On the first evening of the course Regina attended, I asked everyone to draw their names in any way they chose and then to share with the group what they wished about their name and what they had drawn. Her last name is related to the English word “cellar”; and the cellar was where so many early and memorable experiences had taken place. Regina was born in Germany during the war. The bombing raids sent her and her family many times into the cellar, where she felt not only her own fear, but the fear and terror of the other members in her family who were in the cellar with her. Because of these early traumatic experiences, the cellar was equated with darkness, sadness and fear. She also remembers other unpleasant childhood experiences when she was sent to the cellar for having disobeyed or misbehaved in some way. She was a lively and active child with a fastidious and perfectionist mother whose standards of conduct were ill-suited for a frisky and tomboyish girl. She often heard, like a refrain, “*Als Mädchen macht man das nicht.*” “Little girls don’t do that.” A stint in the cellar was her punishment. Another especially impressive and vivid childhood memory that arises from the cellar was her unquestionably real feeling of an Indian, an American Indian, waiting for her there with bow and arrow whenever she was sent to fetch beer or other items from this dark nether region. She knew he was there, and she says she could often feel the arrow shot in her back as she turned to leave.

The Cellar was a recurring and undeniably important image for Regina. From the incidents that follow, one will see how even more significant it has been in her life.

We are not required to know what figure to make before starting the process. Although one is not discouraged from making that kind of predetermination, the participants are aware that it can take time before the figure fully presents itself. In the beginning, Regina had the strong intention of making her cellar companion, the American Indian; she also felt, quite definitely, that her Indian would be a man. But after a particularly impressive experience that transpired during a movement meditation in which she encountered and ‘became’ “*ein Säufer, ein Landstreicher*”, “an alcoholic, a tramp”, she decided that it was actually this man that she should be making. The experience with the tramp was one of the high points in the process for Regina. The following is what took place.

The room in which we met for the first part of the evening was divided into two sections: firstly, dark and closed; and, secondly, open and light. After a silent meditation, at the point of being as empty of thought and expectation as possible, we let ourselves be guided to either side of the room, and to be in that “dark and closed” and “open and light” space through movement, letting arise what needed to arise. At any point in this exploration one was free to move to the opposite side of the room, embodying that quality of energy as well. Within the period of time allotted for the exercise, there was no limit to how long one spent on either side, or to how many times one crossed the boundary between one side of the room and the other. One was also free to straddle both sides, dark and light, simultaneously – all in whatever form of movement or embodiment, including sound, that evinced itself. Here in this room of lightness and darkness, the alcoholic tramp was born.

Regina says of her experience, *“Ich war er. Er war ich.”* “I was he. He was I.” And through him she learned much. He was ill, an alcoholic with heart trouble. But in spite of being sick, he was full of life and had no fear. He knew that he was addicted and that he was going to die, but he was not afraid of death. He was able to let go of his fears and his sadness in spite of his life-threatening situation. The *Landstreicher’s* presence helped Regina to let go of some of her own fears, as well as some of the strict demands that she had placed on herself. Through this humble yet profound encounter she was shown that one can be ill, and yet be happy and fulfilled at the same time. He showed her that one is allowed to be happy, even when one is not perfect. *“Man darf.”* “One is allowed.” It seemed reasonable that such an important figure would be the logical choice for coming into manifestation as her inner figure.

During our Christmas break, I asked everyone to choose an image with which to work for the two-week period that we were not meeting. In whatever way felt appropriate and important for each person, they were to focus on their chosen image as often as they found it possible, to let it grow within them. Regina chose the image of a waterfall, which she sat by for long periods of time in the countryside in silence. She both painted and wrote about her experiences. She had never before worked so intensively with only one word, or image. In the intensive contemplation of falling water, of water falling, releasing itself with abandon into a joy-filled expression of life, she came to experience what is so difficult, if not impossible, to put into words: the connection to her *Göttlichkeit*, to her Godliness, to Godliness itself. The words that did come to her were these:

“And God saw all that He had made; and He saw that it was good.”

Regina’s ability to sense and more fully acknowledge an abiding Presence was taking root and growing in many of the experiences to which she was led in her process with the figure. The joy-filled tramp, living in fearless and loving abandon to life, and to death; the water revealing its splendor and beauty by the surrender of its falling. These were teachers in Regina’s growing capacity to offer herself in trust to the Absolute Ground of Being. Falling and failing were becoming less fearsome.

The *Landstreicher* was still strong in Regina’s mind as the candidate for her inner figure; then, three months into the process, an unexpected and moving image came to Regina during a subsequent meditation. She saw the apparition of a nun floating above a burning bush. Regina notes that the nun was just as fiery and alive in temperament as the burning of the bush. Shortly after beginning to reflect on this image, Regina realized, *“Jetzt!”* “Now! This is the figure I must make.” Without having the vaguest idea of why she should be making a nun, rather than her dearly beloved alcoholic tramp, she set out – like trusting Vasalisa with doll in pocket, guiding her through the darkness of the forest – to make the nun. She, like the surrendering fall of water, put pure trust in the image that came from the unconscious, as well as in the inner voice that said, “Now! This is the figure I must make.” Regina with the Nun is illustrated in Figure 8.1.

8. *The Inner Figure*



Figure 8.1 Regina with Nun (Photographed by Thomas Bichsel)

And so she proceeded to make the nun. *She also began to make a baby for the nun.* This second decision was an act of radical trust. She simply knew, for no rational reason whatsoever, that the nun must have a baby in her arms.

At this point, I would like to tell you what Regina shared with me regarding her parents and her childhood.

In the earliest years of her life, during the war, Regina lived with her mother and her brother. Eventually, she came to meet an uncle whom they visited on a farm in a far-off village. Regina was three. She spent many lovely hours with her uncle, whom she very much loved; and it was clear to Regina that he loved her as well, with the greatest affection and tenderness. One day her uncle came to live with them. It was only then that she was told: he was her father. Because he was, as a well-known politician, in danger of being captured and imprisoned by the allies occupying Germany, his identity and whereabouts had to be kept secret. At such a young age, Regina could not be entrusted with the knowledge that this was her father. She could have inadvertently revealed him. After coming home, however, Regina's relationship with her uncle-turned-father changed dramatically. He no longer seemed to have any time for her; the tenderness which she experienced with her "uncle" had disappeared completely. She could remember not one affectionate caress from him as her father. She realizes now that in returning home he came into the reality of a broken life and all its overwhelming difficulties. Once a very rich man, he was now poor. His time was spent in preoccupation with his shattered life and with his own individual interests, which included many hours of reading and studying a vast diversity of subjects including philosophy, ancient history, and the arcane.

For many years Regina tried, in vain, to regain her father's love and affection. But he simply had no time for his family. Finally, when Regina was 18 years old, her father was able to come out of his self-imposed cloistering and expressed a desire to share his life and love with his children, with Regina. But she was no longer interested in being close to him. She was well-behaved, polite, but unable to forgive him for what he had done. It was only at his death that forgiveness and intimacy were in some way restored. Regina was in Switzerland when he called for her to come to Germany. He wanted to see her. He waited for her to come before he finally died. His death was a redemption of their estranged relationship. "He showed me a beautiful death. Peaceful, quiet. I am grateful to him for that. He didn't show me how to live, but he showed me how to die."

Years later, Regina re-read the many journals that her father had written when he was in hiding at the farmer's house. She had read them once before, but it was only upon reading them a second time, much later, that she understood what he was writing. "*Er war sehr gottgläubig.*" "He believed very much in God." "And knew many things about nature, the cosmos, things he couldn't show or explain to me." Regina's sense of loss was even more poignant at this new-found realization; it touched an even deeper nerve. To have missed sharing those ideas with him, to have missed learning those precious things from him in childhood, has been a great source of suffering for Regina.

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Regina's relationship with her mother was also in some ways distanced. Being the lively and playful child did not always endear Regina to her mother who had a more reserved manner. "*Ich schwamm gegen den Strom.*" "I swam against the stream." There was always an undercurrent of conflict. There was never a sense of identity with her mother, a sense of being bonded with her. Although Regina feels her mother to be a good person, being overlooked – in favor of her brother or others – has been a consistent experience for Regina in relationship to her mother, and is only one of the many ways in which she realizes that maternal presence has been less than enough. The sense of abandonment is pervasive. Regina's mother had no milk for her when she was born. Shortly after they arrived home from the hospital, a wetnurse had to be employed. That was the second early abandonment Regina experienced. The first brings us directly back to her inner figure, the nun.

The last phase of making the doll requires that one either make or buy clothing for the figure. Since Regina cannot sew she decided to ask her mother for help. She went to Germany and said she needed a nun's habit for her doll.

"A nun? You're making a nun?"

"Yes, a nun."

"Why?"

"I don't know why."

"A nun ... a nun Why a nun? Oh! Of course you're making a nun!
Of course!"

And then, for the first time, the story unfolded.

When Regina was born, her mother had chosen a private clinic in which to give birth. It was a private clinic run by nuns. Her mother had been partially anaesthetized for the delivery, so as to experience less pain and discomfort. Immediately after Regina was born, there was a bombing raid. Because her mother was exhausted from the birth and (due to the anaesthesia) unable to attend to her new child, one of the nuns took Regina into her arms and went down into the cellar with her, where she stayed for the first critical hours of her life. It was, as a newborn infant, *in the arms of the nun*, that Regina was sheltered from harm, and where she felt the first impulses of love and concern. While she had been inadvertently abandoned by her mother, she had felt the harbouring arms of the nun as her salvation in the maelstrom and trauma of sudden separation and bombing. The deeper meaning of Regina's spontaneous vision of a nun hovering over a burning bush finally revealed itself; and her irrational, though emphatic, impulse to make a baby for the nun's arms was no longer a naggingly quizzical notion. Regina's inner figure, appearing as it did, revealed, as well as embodied, a profound mystery in her life.

The unconscious had stored this experience, to be uncovered in this very unexpected and numinous way. But for what reason? What was Regina to understand from this awe-inspiring and synchronistic event? Regina remembers that whenever she was sad or troubled she would

go to the *Kloster*, to the monastery, where the nuns lived. "*Kloster heißt Friede, Liebe.*" "The monastery means peace, love." These first moments in her life, surrounded by the peace and protection she experienced in the arms of the nun, embodied the love and sense of redemption she had continually sought throughout her early life. Retrieving the experience of the nun with Regina-as-baby in her arms was the retrieving of the experience of love and salvation. Through the numen of this synchronistic event, love was made more conscious in Regina's life. "I could as well have made a Christ figure. The nun is an image of Christ for me." Through the numinosity and depth of her experience, Regina is much more certain of her belief in God, *Gottesglaube*, those things about which her father wrote so passionately. "I am more conscious now that God lives in me. I am aware of that power in me. And with this assurance, a growing sense of wisdom, understanding and tolerance, the ability to just let things be as they are, including myself." Just like her beloved *Landstreicher* was able to do.

Cedrus ... and Peter

Like stars, mists and candleflames,
Mirages, dew-drops and water bubbles
Like dreams, lightning and clouds.
In that way will I view all composite phenomena.

Tibetan Wishing Prayer

The making of my last figure had progressed without much event until the modelling of the face. There was something definitely different that needed to happen, I felt, in this figure. It happened one evening, while I was working on the eyes. I took one of the modelling tools and pushed the clay so that the eyes slanted upwards. At first, in their rough unrefined form, the eyes looked other-worldly. After working on them for an hour, I realized they were Asian eyes. I then soon realized I was making a monk; and even more to the point, I was making a spiritual teacher. In the tradition of Asian monks, I decided to make the face to include a bald head, as well as ears, all of porcelain, all in one piece. This was the first time this had occurred in the figure-making as I knew it. The first stages of Tara's face are illustrated in Figure 8.2.

All our porcelain pieces – hands, feet and faces – were finally finished and were brought to the artist who would fire them in his large kiln. There is always the possibility that something will go wrong in the firing: a piece can crack, or worse, explode, thereby endangering other pieces. One never knows, so one prays. On this occasion the artist had fired the clay at the highest temperature possible. This yields a beautiful, translucent, stone-like quality that only porcelain can have when fired at such high temperatures. After about three weeks of waiting, the pieces were returned, all intact. We could breath again. As I looked at my figure's head,

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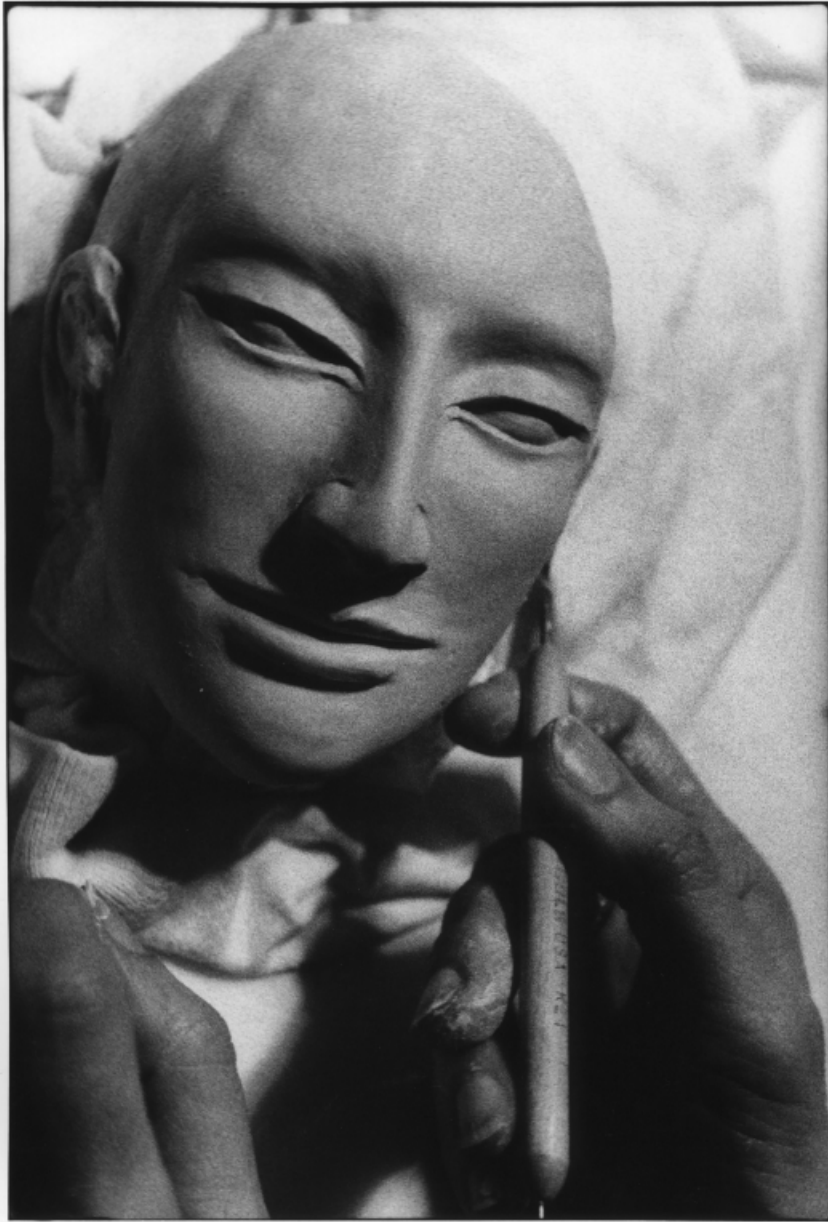


Figure 8.2 First Stages of Tara's face and head (Photographed by Thomas Bichsel)

however, I realized it had become “distorted”. The high temperature was too much for the thin and delicate cranium to withstand. It had collapsed slightly, becoming narrower, and along with it, the face. My monk, I saw, had turned into a woman. At first I was petulant, embarrassingly so. I completely forgot myself as I stood moaning and whining about my piece in front of the other course participants. No one could help noticing my reaction, least of all myself. I stopped short. What was I doing? Apart from the disaster of a completely destroyed piece, I had always told people that these things happen as part of the figure. And now I was ignoring my own counsel, letting my ego desires run nakedly rampant. After I was able to stop long enough to reflect on what had happened, I realized that what I had called “distorted” was not a distortion at all, but rather a transformation. And within that transformation, a message. But what was the figure trying to tell me? Where was my thinking “distorted”, rather than the piece? That was what I had to discover.

Within a very short time, I realized that this figure was, indeed, a spiritual teacher. I had never had that kind of reaction to the so-called aberrations that might have presented themselves in my figures. She was teaching me in a new way to more fully accept what is. What is more, and even more specific to her lesson, I realized the following: I had always looked to men as spiritual teachers. I had never looked to a woman for that role. But the figure was, without question, both before *and after* the transformation of gender, a spiritual teacher. That the teacher had changed from male to female made me stop, realize, and *admit* how ready I have been to regard the spiritual teachings of and by a woman as somehow inferior, or at least not quite as important, or accomplished, as that which might be transmitted by a man. Intellectually, publicly, and without being conscious of the contradiction within me, I would have vehemently denied this. But secretly, deep down in my soul, I knew I had to admit that is what I felt. It took this figure to put that destructive prejudice unavoidably in my face (if you will excuse the pun). For several days thereafter, I felt both saddened and disturbed by what had been revealed by this event. The sadness soon abated, however, as I became more and more aware of the gift of my figure’s teachings, and all that could (and would) follow as a result.

Without knowing exactly who *Tara* was at the time, other than the primary female deity of compassion in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, I referred to my doll as a Tara figure. Later, I discovered that Tara is the principle female Bodhisattva in Tibetan Buddhism: she is the female aspect of the Buddha, i.e., the Buddha, or the Fully Enlightened, *in female form*.

About six months after completing this figure, which I will refer to as *Tara*, I began to talk with my friend, Rachael Wooten, about her. I do not recall now exactly how it was that we began the conversations, but I am certain it was because of Rachael’s active interest in Tibetan Buddhism that the dialogue started. After hearing me refer to *Tara* and describing her, and after hearing a landmark dream I had had in 1982 about the 16th Karmapa (who holds for one sect in Tibetan Buddhism a similar position as the Dalai Lama holds for all the sects), Rachael told me that I should see her teacher, Lama Lodro, Abbot of the Tibetan Monastery in Switzerland, and tell him my dream. I was extremely hesitant. It seemed too personal an issue

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*Figure 8.3 Original gilded-bronze statue of Avalokiteshvara
(two views, photographed by Michael Drobný)*

to bother him with, although, since meeting the Karmapa in Santa Fe, New Mexico, in 1979, I had wanted to become actively involved in Tibetan Buddhism for years. The door, however, never seemed to open fully enough for me to enter, for whatever reason. Rachael not only continued to encourage me to see the Abbot of the monastery, but also asked Lama Lodro directly if it would be appropriate to see him and recount my dream. He responded in the affirmative. Finally, after all these years – after the making of *Tara* – the door opened.

Before going on to say what happened when I finally went to see Lama Lodro, I would like to explain that Rachael was, and is, firmly convinced of women's equal value in relationship to men, both in the transmission of spiritual teachings and otherwise. It has been primarily through my friendship with Rachael that my relationship to the Feminine, in this regard, has shifted. *Tara* was my link to Rachael; Rachael was my link to Lama Lodro; and Lama Lodro was my direct link to the teachings. Not surprisingly (for this story), the first major teaching from Lama Lodro was to receive from him *The Initiation of The Twenty-One Taras* (*Tara* has twenty-one different aspects or emanations) and to receive, through it, the devotional practices that are recited to the feminine aspect of the Buddha. I was now in the position to express and experience spiritual devotion to the Divine Feminine through a grounded, rooted tradition to which I felt inexplicably but unequivocally connected. What is very important to the synchronistic nature of the events is that it was Rachael and her discussions with Lama Lodro that had inspired the giving of *The Initiation of The Twenty-One Taras*, which was consequently made available to the entire Tibetan Buddhist community in the area of Zürich. I had been led very carefully to the lap of the Mother, the Spiritual Mother, who provides nourishment not primarily for the body, but for the development of one's spiritual life.

Very pertinent to the story, and certainly not just a coincidental occurrence, is the fact that it was precisely at this time that the relationship with my own personal mother began to take new form. We have always been close, the relationship always intense. We have grown, suffered, and rejoiced with one another. And yet, some of the deepest wounds were still in the process of healing. In the period of time during which I became actively involved with Tibetan Buddhism and received *The Initiation of the Twenty-One Taras*, long-standing and somewhat intractable wounds were addressed more deeply than at any other time, and began to heal. (Of course, it must also be said that nearly seven years of Jungian analysis with Dr. Helmut Barz is the solid and irreplaceable psychic backbone of this development.) Although we are still mother and daughter, and always will be, we are freer than ever before to stand independent of one another, each respecting the life and autonomy of the other, each having more compassion for the other. The Spiritual Mother presides between us.

Returning now to my initial meeting with Lama Lodro, I finally took up my courage and made an appointment to see him. In this first meeting, I recounted my dream of the 16th Karmapa. I told Lama Lodro that the Karmapa had appeared in a dream during an extreme physical crisis in which I was very close to death; the Karmapa seemed to have aroused the energies of healing through his presence in the dream, enough so that I was able to recover and

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call for the much needed care and medical assistance I had originally resisted. After hearing the dream to its completion, Lama Lodro's response was that there had clearly been previous connections with Tibetan Lamas and Buddhist teachings in former lives; he graciously invited me to participate, once again, in *this* one. I began then to tell him about the figure I had made of *Tara*. Before I could explain in any detail, he interrupted and asked me quite spontaneously; "Figures? You make figures? I'm in need of a figure. Can you make one for me?" I was dumbfounded. Not only was I aware that the figures I made were very different from the figures he had in mind, which are actually statues, but I was totally taken off guard by his immediate, trusting and direct request. After responding with a flurry of excuses about how I did not make statues, had never made *any* statue, and did not know if I could ever make what he wanted (and simultaneously thinking to myself feverishly the whole while that I did not have any *time* to do this) ... I said yes. I had suddenly realized I was being given a teaching, the nature of which I did not know, but could not refuse. The next time I saw him, he put a centuries-old, gilded-bronze figure in front of me and told me I could take it home to use as a model. Once again, I was speechless. I took it home, photographed it, then returned it, using the photos as the model. I started, then, on my long sojourn into the unknown.

It took approximately 220 hours to model the figure of porcelain clay, over a period of four to five months. It stands 22 centimeters tall. The statue includes a base in the form of a lotus blossom, a lion which sits on the base, and *Avalokiteshvara*, the Buddha of Compassion, who sits atop the lion. I documented the making of the figure, including my experiences and dreams, while constructing it. What seems appropriate to recount is the fact that quite often, just before going to sleep and upon arising, I would receive information about how to put the figure together. I did not know how to do it; I had never worked in this way before. But I was guided, shown step by step, as to how I should accomplish my task. In a somewhat miraculous way, it seemed, the figure came to completion after many long weeks of work that, although intense, proceeded without any insurmountable problem. Once again, dumbfounded. The original and reproduction statues of the Buddha of Compassion are illustrated in Figure 8.3 and Figure 8.4.

There were many things I learned while making this statue, the nature and mystery of which feel inexpressible, or would at least seem reductive in the telling. What I can say is that the compassion which *Avalokiteshvara* embodies began to touch my life in the deepest ways. A widening sense of compassion, not only for others but also for my own inconsistencies, flaws and failures, began to flow more freely. It seemed that the very heart of *Vajrayana* Buddhism was finding its invincible way to mine through the making of this figure.

The statue complete, I brought it to Lama Lodro. I had told him previously that since I had had no experience with glazing a piece like this, I would deliver it in its pure, unglazed, or white, state. He said fine, he would paint it. When I delivered the statue, however, he said he needed to find someone who would do the painting. I was a bit confused, but that was not unusual. I recovered, and immediately suggested that Peter, my husband, might offer to do it

for him. I called Peter on the spot. After five seconds of deliberation, he said yes. I could tell he knew it was a teaching for him as well. With Lama Lodro enthusiastically nodding and smiling me a farewell, I left his chamber and brought the statue back home for Peter to paint.

Originally, Peter thought it would be a relatively quick and simple process to paint the statue. But it was to be otherwise. After several long weeks of being unable to approach the painting, he finally settled into the process. In the end, he spent almost as much time painting the statue as I had taken to model it. And the teachings that came along with the painting were some of the most intense, and searing, either of us has ever experienced. It had not been destined to be a quick and simple, or painless, process. Peter and I have been married for 13 years. We met each other as a result of our mutual interest in image-making. This has been one of our strongest bonds throughout our relationship. No matter what else has happened between us, we have always been able to put aside our differences in our work as artists. What happened as a result of working on the statue together seems to have been no exception, but this time our ability to put our differences aside occurred in an extraordinary and totally unexpected way.

In our best moments, which are many, Peter and I are the most committed of friends, respectful of each other's individuality and humanity. In our most difficult moments with each other (or as a result thereof), we have both understood how easy it is to lose almost all touch with human decency, and to feel the most abject sense of hatred possible for another human being. We have had that very difficult and tortuous experience with each other three times in our relationship. The first time it happened, we found our way through it, in spite of the near catastrophic state of devastation we felt as a result. The experience left us reeling; our survival of it, however, created an almost irrevocable bond of trust. The last two instances came while Peter was painting the statue. It was during these two traumatic events that we were given the invaluable opportunity to find our way – but only with the greatest of psychic and spiritual effort – into an unparalleled (for us) experience of compassion, not only for each other, but for ourselves, individually, as well. Conscious, authentic self-forgiveness and self-love can sometimes be the most difficult inner experiences to attain. It was working with the statue, and with the teachings it represents in image form, that brought us to this experience.

I already mentioned this above, but I believe it bears repeating here: the deity of the statue, *Avalokiteshvara*, is the Buddha of Compassion. It is this aspect of the Buddha that the Dalai Lama incarnates. Furthermore, it is this aspect of the Buddha that the Karmapa, the Lama of whom I dreamt, and with whom I took my initial Buddhist vows, also incarnates. Through Lama Lodro and his request for the statue, the Karmapa's and the Buddhist teachings found their way to me again – indeed, to both Peter and myself – providing the necessary experiences for generating the healing powers of compassion, the heart of *Vajrayana*, or Tibetan Buddhism.

With the entrance of *Tara* into my personal process of *The Inner Figure*, I was led to these experiences I describe. *Tara* is associated with the element of ether. It is said that when one is in distress and when one fervently calls her for help, *Tara* will come immediately, the element

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Figure 8.4 Reproduction of gilded-bronze statue made by Cedrus and Peter
(two views, photographed by Peter Andreas Ziermann)

of ether being omnipresent and moving faster than the wind. Perhaps the making of *Tara* was an unconscious call made conscious, leading to a shocking though healing experience of the numinous.

It has been said that enlightenment is the state of being unhindered in one's actions. Lama Lodro seemed to have been unhindered in the act of requesting the making and painting of this statue. In this unhindered state, he gave both Peter and me the possibility of receiving teachings that we would never otherwise have experienced.

Lama Lodro has been instrumental in furthering the figure-making process. There is now a very important, additional aspect to *The Inner Figure*, both in ideology and in practice, and I am certain that what has been learned through the gift of this experience will continue to be incorporated into *The Inner Figure* process.

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There is in the soul of humankind a power of imagination which can produce concrete changes in matter. For the alchemist it was the matter contained within the retort; for the shaman, the alterations occur in nature where stones speak. Changes of this nature occur in *The Inner Figure* process as well, when the image-maker transforms the matter of his or her own being through the making and manifestation of the soul's image.

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